

High school

11



**OUROBOROS AND THE
PROMOTION EXAM**

**ICHIEI
ISHIBUMI**

ILLUSTRATION BY
Miyama-Zero



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OUROBOROS AND THE PROMOTION EXAM

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ICHIEI ISHIBUMI

ILLUSTRATION BY
MIYAMA-ZERO


New York

Copyright



Volume 11

Ichiei Ishibumi

Translation by Haydn Trowell

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Ah, that's right... I'm human, I am.

Life.0

It happened right around the time the school festival was wrapping up.

When I—Azazel—finally heard about it, I responded with what was probably the most idiotic expression ever to cross my face.

“...Are you serious about this, Vali?”

Yes, Vali had reached out to me on a private line.

Judging by how upbeat his face looked on the magic square displaying his visage, he must have been doing well for himself.

“Yeah. This is what he—no, I guess it’s she now, right? This is what she wants. And I’m kind of intrigued myself. It’s a pretty good opportunity, if you ask me.”

Vali had offered an unbelievable proposal. Honestly, what he was suggesting had the potential to redraw the balance of power among all the major factions.

“...We both know what you’re like. There’s got to be more to it than that. What else are you planning?” I asked.

“You’re as sharp as ever,” Vali replied with a forced grin. *“Is that why the other powers have been giving you the cold shoulder lately?”*

“That’s none of your business.”

“That’s exactly your problem. You’re going around involving yourself in things that don’t concern you. It’s only natural that others wonder what you’re scheming at.”

Well, there was no denying that I wasn’t exactly on good terms with the upper echelons of the various powers. The title of governor of the fallen angels already sounded pretty shady, and on top of that, I was the one who’d first publicly declared my support for peace and reconciliation.

Was I a busybody? A meddler...? Issei had accused me as much recently.

“This is my nature. If it opens me up to being stabbed in the back, then so be

it," I said with a sigh.

Vali looked on with exasperation for a long moment before muttering, *"Someone is moving to take her out."*

"Of course there is. She's got more enemies than there are stars in the sky. The real problem, as far as most are concerned, is that no one has managed to pull it off."

"Yes, but I mean someone from within her own ranks. It sounds like they're getting pretty close to making their move."

Ahhh. Now I understood what Vali was getting at. The image of a youth armed with an all-powerful spear surfaced in the back of my mind.

"...So you want to smoke him out?"

"I'm just trying to determine whether he's an enemy or not," Vali stated confidently.

He definitely wants that guy to be his foe so he can fight him...

"Eh, I guess he's an enemy, then. I'd already suspected as much... It's about time we settled it," Vali said, his lips curling in a grin of supreme delight.

Sheesh. There was no helping this guy. He was an incurable battle maniac.

Life.1

Study Season and Mating Season?

My morning began with a battle right there atop my bed.

I—Issei Hyoudou—opened my eyes to find the prez—er, I mean, R-Rias—glaring at Akeno. Both were already fully dressed in their school uniforms.

Apparently, they were ready to duel it out to see who would have the right to give me a wake-up kiss.

R-Rias broke into a self-assured grin.

“Trying to steal a kiss from my Issei first thing in the morning...!” she snapped. “There’s a lot more I’d like to say to you, Akeno, but seeing as Issei gave me a good treat last night, I suppose I’ll let you off this time.”

“Oh? How nice for you. Issei, did you already give Rias here something amazing to remember?” Akeno asked, placing her hand over her mouth, her interest obviously piqued.

I know what you’re thinking, but we didn’t do anything particularly naughty... I mean, Asia was there, too... We kissed before we went to bed, and then we slept next to each other. That was it! Honest!

You’re probably saying, “Huh? Isn’t that normal?” No, no, no. I only just confessed my love to her, you know? I was overwhelmed with emotion and, at the same time, incredibly embarrassed, my heart pounding so hard, it could have busted out of my chest!

I liked Rias, and she liked me... Kissing and hugging when you shared feelings like that carried incredibly destructive power!

And the prez—no, Rias!—she practically spoiled me! This elder sister-like figure, having stepped closer than her previous “master only” relationship with me, was formidable...!

"I won't be able to sleep without a goodnight kiss... Please, Issei?" she'd said. "Hold me gently, Issei. I love you," she'd whispered in that luscious, sugar-sweet voice.

It was like that all night before I could get some rest. Nghhhhh! I couldn't stand it anymore! I could feel a nosebleed coming on just thinking about it! I was so happy that I could have jumped with joy!

Ah, to be alive! Thank you, Demon Kings! You especially, Ajuka Beelzebub, for making my pawn Evil Piece! I was beyond grateful to have been reborn as a demon! I would keep doing my utmost for the sake of the underworld!

Incidentally, I was still having difficulty bringing myself to call Rias by name. I'd made a habit of addressing her as *Prez*, and slipping back into that was an understandable mistake, but the truth was...I was too embarrassed to use her first name! But it wasn't that I didn't want to. I really did. It was just difficult to do so without hesitating.

Akeno let out a bored sigh. "You're acting calmer than I expected, Rias. I thought you would be burning with jealousy right now... Your reaction isn't at all amusing."

"My apologies. But he's *my* Issei. I won't budge on that."

Rias's unstable mood from before the Rating Game against Sairaorg Bael was no more, replaced with newfound confidence.

"Oh-ho, I see you're flouting your new status as his *official* wife," Akeno remarked.

At this, Rias let out a small laugh before kissing me on the cheek. "It's time for breakfast. Come downstairs," she bade me as she left the room.

From the looks of it, she wasn't too upset with Akeno's words.

"Hmm. It's clear she's pushing herself a bit too hard," Akeno muttered as she sat down on the edge of the bed.

"Pushing herself too hard? Did the prez—R-Rias...! Did something happen?" I asked.

"She couldn't perform especially well in the final round of our recent Rating

Game.”

The battle against Sairaorg? Rias had fought a Longinus imbued with a will of its own, the Regulus Nemea, and had suffered a grievous wound.

“She’s upset with herself for holding you back,” Akeno explained. “Even now, she’s brooding over it.”

“I don’t see it like that at all. Her opponent was crazy strong, that’s all... R-Rias isn’t weak. Plus, she put together tons of good strategies before the match...”

“The recent fight between Chairwoman Sona and Seekvaira Agares attracted more attention on the tactics side of things. Scramble Flags bouts are often overlooked, and ours wasn’t all that flashy, but critics call it a rare example of a professional and impressive display.”

Come to think of it, a magazine in the underworld had done a feature piece on the two matches. Obviously, ours received more media attention overall, but the writer praised the Sitri and the Agares Familias’ battle.

“Rias probably still has a lot to learn as a King, and she’s decided to begin by following Sirzechs’s advice. She’s focusing on studying her powers of destruction.”

Her power of destruction, huh?

“...Is that different from regular training?” I asked.

“Rias and Sirzechs share the same natural ability. However, the nature of their powers, their chief characteristics, I guess, are different. Sirzechs is sometimes described as the ultimate Technique-and-Wizard-type fighter. He wields his abilities as easily as he would his own limbs. Rias, though, is closer to the raw strength of a pure Wizard type. Raw strength over finesse, you might say. But...” Akeno paused there, her eyes narrowing in contemplation. “She lacks that deciding factor. Simply put, she’s missing the next part of the puzzle—a *decisive move*.”

She didn’t have a decisive move? B-but...

“Well, she can release a whole lot of power...,” I said. “Sure, the prez—R-Rias!—is always being pitted against strong opponents...and I guess it would be nice

if she had a special attack up her sleeve, but still...”

“At any rate, she’s working to find one... And really, I’m in no place to judge. I gave a poor show during the last match, too...,” Akeno whispered remorsefully.

“No you didn’t,” I assured her, shaking my head. “The other team’s Queen was just extremely skilled.”

The Queen of the Abaddon family had the ability to create Holes. She was said to be one of the highest-regarded Queens among the upcoming generation—up there with Riser’s and Chairwoman Sona’s Queens. Being able to swallow and redirect a blast of electricity and holy light using those Holes was incredible!

“You were able to defeat her in an instant, though...,” Akeno countered.

“U-um, er. Well, that’s technically true...”

I’d done so well only because I’d completely lost it and busted out my Triaina in a fit of rage. Looking back, it kind of felt like I’d gone too far. I needed to take some time to reflect on my hasty actions. Akeno wanted me to keep that technique in reserve, but I’d revealed it too early in the fight...

I lost my cool when my friends got hurt. Perhaps that was my biggest weakness. If I couldn’t learn to keep my anger in check, I would have a hard time becoming a King one day...

While I was lost in thought, Akeno let out a soft chuckle. “I have to work on myself, too, I suppose. But let’s put that aside for now. Are you still having trouble calling Rias by her name?”

“Eh? Erm... I can sometimes... I’m just not used to it, or maybe I’m a little embarrassed. It’s not that I don’t want to, but it makes me nervous!”

That was the honest truth! It was hard to work up the courage to say her name aloud... I was trying my best, though!

Akeno broke out into a smile. “Oh, thank you for that delightful reaction, Issei. Then maybe it’s time I have you address *me* by name, too? Don’t you think it would make her *furious* if we engaged in a little affair right after you confessed to her?”

“A-a-an affair?!”

Akeno was obsessed with cheating, so much so that she'd even brought it up before I revealed my feelings to Rias! She was a total sadist, always wanting to be the one in the driver's seat! And undoubtedly, she took great joy in getting on Rias's nerves.

"I did say I'd make a good candidate for your first mistress, didn't I? I want it so badly, Issei. My body burns for you." Akeno sensually traced her contours.

Her soft white thighs were dazzling... And I knew exactly how they felt. Her whole body was sticky and smooth, my hands all but sinking into it whenever I so much as touched her.

Akeno moved in close and kissed the tip of my nose.

"That will be enough for this morning. Heh-heh, it looks like Asia wants to join us."

Wh-what?! Glancing toward the door, I found Asia standing with an apron tied around her waist!

Her smile was frozen in place! *Asiaaaaa! Your timing is as impeccably awkward as ever!*

No sooner had she glimpsed the situation unfolding than she leaped for my chest, imploring me with tear-filled eyes. "Am I losing to Akeno?! I planned to give you a wake-up kiss!"

Really?! Asia had grown so bold lately! She'd even taken to directly asking me to kiss her! Rias and Akeno's bad influence was absolutely to blame!

And that's when Xenovia appeared.

"What's going on, Asia? Ah! Vice-Prez Akeno is launching an early-morning sneak attack?!"

"What?! Impossible! You can't do something like that at this hour!"

Irina was there as well, her face flushed with surprise!

All three of them?! The Church Trio sure is a bunch of energetic early risers!

It had been only a little while since my confession to Rias... What would happen to me now? Don't get me wrong, I was glad for this attention, but I was

utterly bewildered by the girls' unrelenting onslaught.

Ah, but I *was* happy.

After the absurd morning developments, it was time for breakfast in the living room on the first floor. Led by my mother, most of the girls lodging in our house were quickly moving about, helping to set up the table and lay out the various dishes.

Today, the menu was fried eggs, miso soup, and grilled salmon. We rotated between Japanese, Western, and Chinese breakfast courses, so all the girls had opportunities to show off their culinary skills. As a result, I got to partake in delicious fare every morning! How lucky could one guy be?!

"Ah, breakfast, lunch, and dinner are my favorite times of day!" my dad said. "You're all such excellent cooks! Every item is always delicious! You know what they say: The way to a man's heart is through his stomach! You understand, right, Issei?" He looked at me with a grin as he ate.

"I do! I really do, Dad!" I answered with a firm nod.

Mealtime was always fun! I got to sit surrounded by beautiful ladies, eat dishes they prepared, and chat with them all! It was flawless! Perfect!

How glad I was to have been born a guy!

"Here's your bento box, Issei!" Rias said with a broad grin as she placed it before me.

Mom, Rias, Asia, and Akeno made my lunches for school on an alternating schedule. Xenovia, Irina, and Rossweisse mostly just ate what the others whipped up and didn't take part in preparing the lunches. They cooked occasionally, but there was simply no competing with the Four Heavenly Kings of the Hyoudou Kitchen. Asia's skills in that field improved tremendously over the past few months. My mother said she would be the first successor to the Hyoudou family household taste.

Anyway, today was Rias's chance to prepare my bento box, and the others looked happy for her to have the opportunity. She always wore such a joyous smile as she went about the work.

The centerpiece was a heart-shaped topping of pink fish floss, and every day there was an assortment of delicious sides that must have required considerable time and effort to make. Honestly, it was incredible! The very best!

“Rias has made your lunch all by herself... Way to go, Issei,” my dad remarked, nodding his head up and down.

A lunch made with love! That’s what it was. Yet Matsuda and Motohama said the same thing about my Asia and Akeno lunches as well. I wondered if there was a better description for a uniquely Rias meal.

“Is that a *first wife’s bento*...?” Rossweisse wondered aloud as she lifted a hand to her chin. “Now that I live here, perhaps I should take the initiative and show off some of the dishes from my homeland...”

Her homeland? What sort of food do they make in Valhalla...? Whatever it turned out to be, I was excited. This could only mean more variety.

Ravel stepped over to me while I grinned like a moron. She also had a bento box...

Hold on, that’s not the one she usually gives to me.

“Oh, Ravel. Who is that for?” I asked.

“It’s a present for Gasper. He went out training this morning all by himself.”

“Training?! Gaspy?!” I exclaimed with disbelief.

Practice?! Him?! What a shock!

“He said he felt powerless during what happened the other day,” Rias explained as she took the seat next to mine. “He has elected to begin his own training regimen in addition to his usual practice with you and Yuuto. He’s starting with the basics and taking it moderately so he doesn’t overdo things.”

What happened the other day... Rias was obviously referring to the match against the Bael Familia. We couldn’t talk about it too openly with my parents around.

“He’s determined to master his abilities to reach *that stage*,” Akeno added. “Which means he needs to hone his body. To that end, he’s working to build

strength and going out for runs every morning.”

Oh, so he’s hoping to unlock his Balance Breaker.

Our latest Rating Game must have really affected him. I thought he’d fought incredibly well. He’d showed us his masculine spirit... But I guess he couldn’t forgive himself for not being strong enough.

As a fellow man, I understood perfectly. We dwelled on our weaknesses and cursed ourselves for them. I had to help him as much as I could. The guys of the Gremory Familia—Kiba, Gasper, and I—had to be strong enough to protect the girls at all costs!

“Yep.” Xenovia had a serious glint in her eyes. “He’s a boy. He’ll definitely get stronger.”

She supported Gasper more than anyone else. In that last match, he saved her from a pretty nasty situation. However...

“It’s hard to imagine him all buffed and muscly...,” I whispered.

A composite image of Gasper with Mil’s body formed in my mind, a creature like the Conqueror of Century’s End from Fist of the North Star.

“Yo! Issei! I’ve been working on my vampire punch! Mixing protein powder into your blood has done wonders for my muscles! Just look at these biceps! Yeah!”

What would I do if he ended up like that...? Thankfully, I didn’t think he’d go that far. Gasper working to increase his basic stats was a good thing. If a bonehead like me could grow to run around in my Balance Breaker state without much trouble, he definitely could, too! And that began with strength exercises and running.

“Koneko? You look a little pale?” Ravel said, peering her way.

Hmm?

Looking at my *nekomata* underclassman, I saw that Ravel was right. Koneko’s face was a little red, like she was in pain. Perhaps she’d caught a cold?

“It’s nothing,” she replied brusquely.

Ravel, concerned, placed a hand on Koneko's forehead. "Your cheeks are a bit flushed, though. Are you sure you're not sick? How about I make you my family's special apple sorbet? The recipe has been in the Phenex line for generations, and I just got a delivery of apples from back home. I'll make some just for you!"

"...Your kindness is unnecessary," Koneko declared, brushing the other girl's hand away.

At this, Ravel snapped, her coiled hair flaring in rage. "Tsk! Rejecting another's kindness?! It must be lovely to live as a cat, doing whatever you please!"

"I don't need to be lectured by a birdbrain."

"B-birdbrain?! Doesn't that expression mean someone who's super forgetful...?"

"You've been studying. Congratulations."

"Ngh! You spiteful cat girl...!"

Ha-ha-ha... These two bickered all the time, and their quarrels had become part of our daily routine. It wasn't that they didn't get along with each other—Koneko frequently stepped in to help Ravel, and Ravel relied on her for assistance. From what I could tell, they were genuinely good friends. I actually enjoyed seeing this side of Koneko.

As I watched from the sidelines, my mom whispered, "Hey, Issei."

"...What is it, Mom?" I asked as I gulped down a glass of water.

"When will I meet my grandchildren?"

Bah! A barrage of water sprayed out from my mouth in a fine mist!

Wiping my mouth, I responded hoarsely, "What... Wh-wh-wh-wh-what are you talking about?!"

Seriously, where did *that* come from?! Mom?! Why did you suddenly want grandkids?!

My mom fixed me with a severe look. "Well...you've started calling Rias by her name here at home... So I figured it was a matter of time. I'd like my grandchild

to have a Japanese name. Some don't sound out of place in other countries, you know. If it's a girl, you could give her a cute name like Eri or Mari!"

She'd already planned that far ahead?! Too fast! *Far* too fast! What was she thinking?!

"It's too soon to think about grandkids and names!"

I had only just confessed my feelings to Rias! The relationship had to progress smoothly and in the proper order! Couldn't my mom watch on with warm affection as Rias and I grew closer?!

Everyone else was chuckling quietly! Rias, on the other hand, was acting awfully bashful—her face had turned bright red!

"I—I'm fine with how things are! I don't care about kids at the moment! I just want to live with Rias!" I declared forcefully.

With that, Rias took my hand. "M-me too. Being with Issei is enough... I'm so happy." She beamed, her cheeks red.

"...Rias."

"Issei..."

Our gazes met.

What a great woman! We were positively in love with each other! I could have died from joy on the spot!

Ah, Rias. Ah, Rias! My cute, beautiful Rias!

"I believe this is what is commonly known as a lovey-dovey couple. Do try to act normal at school, you two," Rossweisse chided us between sips of coffee.

Why did she only choose times like this to act like a proper teacher?!

Koneko stared hard at Rias and me, then lowered her head. "Grandchildren... Babies... Happiness..." she muttered.

...? Ravel was right. She really didn't look too hot. Maybe Koneko genuinely was ill?



That night, Sirzechs, Grayfia, and Azazel paid a visit to my home, and we all

gathered in the VIP room on the top floor for a stern discussion.

Sirzechs instructed me, Kiba, Akeno, and Rias to sit in front of him so that he could address us directly.

“Issei, Kiba, Akeno—as I told the three of you the other day, you have each proven yourselves. As a result, the Four Great Demon Kings, myself included, and the underworld’s other leading figures, have recommended you for promotion.”

So that’s what they’re here for! Yep. Kiba, Akeno, and I were all up for promotions. Sirzechs had mentioned it to me after the match with Sairaorg, though at the time I’d been so out of it that I hadn’t fully understood what he was talking about.

But wow, he was talking about *that* kind of promotion, you know? A Demon King himself was bringing up a possibility that I hadn’t dared imagine! It was always my goal to rise in the ranks, but who would’ve expected it to happen so soon?

Evidently, our efforts against Loki and the Khaos Brigade were widely regarded as significant achievements... For some reason, the Gremory Familia had a knack for winding up in impossible and dangerous situations, and trust me, it was not easy coming out alive. It made sense we were being praised for surviving deadly crises. Still, I hadn’t expected the reward to be a rise in station...

“Given the nature of your actions, it would be natural for all three of you to be elevated to high-class demons. However, the promotion system has its rules, so we’d like you to take the middle-class demon exam first.”

Middle-class demon...exam...? Hold on, high-class?! We’re going to be made high-class demons?! Seriously...? I could hardly grasp what that meant!

Kiba and Akeno, who were sitting next to me, were clearly surprised, yet they looked less flustered by this news than I was. I was the only one who let his astonishment show.

“Given how well the three of you have distinguished yourselves, it wouldn’t be out of the question to elevate you all to high-class demons,” Azazel

remarked, pausing to drink from a glass of wine. “Unfortunately, demon society has certain procedures, and the bigwigs are pretty hung up on the old rules. So you’ll be promoted first to middle-class demons for a while... Then you’ll be elevated again to high-class demons. You can think about what you want to do with your lives while waiting for your second advancement.”

He spoke as if it were all so easy!

“M-middle class...h-high class...for real?! A-are we really worthy...?” I wondered aloud.

I couldn’t be sure. To be honest, I had no idea what to do with myself now that my dreams had suddenly come so much closer to becoming a reality.

“Yes,” Sirzechs said with a nod and a smile. “Repelling those terrorists and defeating the evil god Loki were both major achievements. On top of that, you performed splendidly against the Bael Familia the other day. And most of all, Issei, you’re the Breast Dragon Emperor, a celebrity in the underworld. When you consider all that, a promotion seems completely justified.”

That kids’ show influenced this decision?! What a shock! I thought it was simply a moneymaking venture on the part of the House of Gremory... Incidentally, a new washing product called a Sponge Dragon came out the other day. The Gremorys were even releasing new merchandise based on our match against Sairaorg’s Familia.

“Congratulations on being recommended for promotion, Issei, Akeno, and Yuuto. I’m proud of you all. I couldn’t ask for a better Familia,” Rias praised us, beaming with satisfaction.

She looked legitimately happy in response to this news, grateful that her Familia members were publicly acknowledged.

“Issei, Kiba, Akeno! Congratulations!”

“Yep, way to go. I’m proud of you guys.”

“I’m really interested in this middle-class demon promotion exam!”

Asia, Xenovia, and Irina—our Church Trio—were also overjoyed.

“I—I’ll have to keep working hard, so I don’t fall too far behind!”

Even Gaspy had some positive words to share! He'd really changed. The old gloomy vampire was nowhere to be found these days.

"I also want to get a promotion soon, so I can live a stable life with a high salary."

Rosswesse's goals were as commendable and as levelheaded as ever!

"This Familia is so well balanced that Riser can't hope to compete," Ravel commented.

Yeah! I was pretty sure we wouldn't lose to Riser again!

"If it's the Phenexes you're worried about, their eldest son is the one with the top-notch team. Now *they're* well-balanced," Azazel responded.

The Phenex family's eldest son, huh?

"My oldest brother is the future head of the family, and it would naturally be an issue if he were weak. That aside, your Familia has made some remarkable accomplishments, Rias. To think that three members are up for advancement after such a short period. It's marvelous, don't you think, Koneko?" Ravel turned to her friend.

"Of course... Congratulations, Issei, Yuuto, and Akeno." Koneko gave us a quick smile. While she seemed genuinely pleased for us, I detected a dispiritedness in her expression.

"Well, if you ask me, it won't be long before everyone else in the Gremory Familia starts getting promoted, too," Azazel said. "You guys have pulled off some incredible stuff. In terms of raw power, you already rival high-class demons. A Familia like yours is a rare thing, you know."

So the others will get their own shots at promotion, too. That made sense—it wouldn't be right to credit only the three of us after we'd all faced those life-or-death struggles in the last battle.

Kiba and Akeno both rose to their feet and offered Sirzechs a respectful bow.

"Thank you very much for recommending me for promotion. It's a great honor. As Rias Gremory's Knight, I humbly accept your offer, Lord Sirzechs."

"And I, as Rias Gremory's Queen, am filled with gratitude for your kind

evaluation.”

The two of them certainly were professional.

“What about you, Issei?”

Sirzechs turned to me this time!

I quickly stood and bowed deeply before him. “Of course I accept! Thank you...! To be honest, I’m still in shock. I mean, I never dreamed this could happen so soon. But I do want to get promoted to further my goals...! A-and to live up to Rias’s—the prez’s—expectations!”

Uh-oh! It was probably a bit rude to call her by name in front of a Demon King.

Or so I thought, but Sirzechs flashed me a mischievous grin. “Wow, Issei. Bold enough to say her name in my presence now?”

“No, it’s just...”

I did my best to respond humbly, but Sirzechs laughed joyfully. “Ha-ha-ha! Good for you! Keep it up. I’m happy to see you two getting closer!”

“B-brother! This isn’t a game!” Rias exclaimed as she leaped to her feet. Her face was bright red. Dang, she was cute when she got angry...

“Ha-ha-ha, it’s all good. Wouldn’t you agree, Grayfia?” Sirzechs asked, motioning toward her.

“That isn’t for me to say...,” she replied with a cool expression. “However, I don’t think it’s inappropriate for them to address each other by name, all things considered.”

What?! Even Grayfia was rooting for us?!

“...Grayfia... Sister-in-law...,” Rias responded, falling silent as the blood rushed to her cheeks.

Yep, there wasn’t much else that she could say in response to that.

“Good, good.” Sirzechs nodded. “In that case, you can address me as your brother-in-law! Come on now, Issei! Say it!”

Thwack!

Grayfia hit him hard over the head with a folding fan.

“Master Sirzechs, you’re taking this too far... Can’t you wait until the appropriate time?”

“R-right. Perhaps Gremory men have a habit of rushing things... *Ahem.*”

Azazel, off to the side, let out a few chuckles before breathing a fresh sigh. “Issei, Akeno, Kiba—you’ll take the middle-class demon promotion exam in the underworld next week. That’s the earliest possible date.”

—! It was coming up sooner than I anticipated.

“Next week. That’s pretty quick,” Kiba observed.

“If I remember correctly, the middle-class demon promotion exam consists of a written portion and a practical one, and it requires a report drafted in advance, correct?” Akeno inquired. “Practical skills aside, I’m sure the report and written test won’t pose any major challenges.”

Hold on. We have to do an essay?! And a whole written test...? Will I be okay?

I was starting to get worried when Azazel said, “Don’t worry. Akeno and Kiba will be fine with the written part. It’s just basic history about demons, general knowledge, the Rating Game—those sorts of things. And as for the report... What’s that got to be about again?” He turned to Grayfia, who stepped forward to explain.

“The essay must be submitted on test day and should explain what you intend to do after becoming a middle-class demon. You are to write about your goals and ambitions and make certain to list your previous accomplishments.”

Ah, so the theme is our dreams and achievements.

I doubted that I could write anything too complicated, so maybe it would be best to keep it clear and to the point. But still, a report...?

“It sounds like a human-world test,” I commented.

At this, Azazel looked to Sirzechs. “Well, I guess you could say demon society used your exams as a base model. Right?”

Sirzechs nodded. “Most demons promoted to middle-class status are

reincarnated humans. For that reason, we've based our promotion tests on the kind conducted in your realm."

As I thought about it, that began to make sense. Many new demons were reborn humans, which meant the exam takers would be, too. I guess the test structure was designed with that in mind.

Azazel tapped his knee as he looked us over. "Anyway, your reports are due on test day, so that's your first priority." Suddenly, Azazel leveled an index finger at me. "You, Issei, are different, however."

"M-me?"

"You also need to study for the written portion! You might be able to get by when it comes to general knowledge, but you'll need to study to answer all the specialized questions! I can't imagine it'll be all bad, though. You've got a litany of smart and gifted ladies here to help."

Rias patted me on the shoulder. "Leave it to us, Issei. I'll teach you what you need to know."

"I want to brush up on my knowledge, too, so let's study together, Issei," Kiba added.

Akeno brought a hand to her cheek. "Oh dear. I suppose I should join you as well, then?"

Whoa, thank you for the show of support, everyone! Rias and Akeno were more than enough, but even our resident pretty boy was willing to lend a hand! Truly, there was nothing better than good friends.

However, there was still one more problem...

"Um, what about the practical exam?" I asked.

At this, Sirzechs, Grayfia, and Azazel each made sour expressions as they exchanged glances.

"You don't have to worry about that one, all right?" Azazel replied as though I shouldn't have bothered posing the question.

"Um... But if it will help me earn more points overall, I should probably train for it," I noted.

Azazel, however, waved a hand in front of his face. “Seriously, you don’t need to worry about it. You’ll see what I mean on the day of. Akeno, Kiba—you don’t need to stress about it, either. Focus on your reports.”

““Okay,”” the two answered in unison.

Huuuhhh?! They’re both okay with that...?

Seriously? So I had to study for a written test while ignoring the practical part, my best chance at getting some extra points? I doubted I would do well on the written section, so hitting the books was a necessity. That said, I still wanted to squeeze in a little physical training. I couldn’t afford to slack off in any regard.

Prompted by anxiety, I timidly raised a hand into the air. “Um, one more question... This is kind of embarrassing to ask, but what happens if we fail? Do we lose the recommendations?”

Sirzechs shook his head. “No, that won’t happen. Once you receive your recommendation, you can’t lose it even if you fail the exam. You can retake the test as many times as you like. It’ll take a truly awful result for the opportunity to be revoked.”

That was a relief. Even if I screwed up the first time, I could always try again so long as I didn’t commit some grave offense. Yep, that was a load off my chest.

Yet while I sat there in relief, Sirzechs declared, “Besides, I’m confident you’ll pass, Issei. I understand that you’re worried because it’s only a week away, but you’ve got this.”

A Demon King had issued his stamp of approval!

Will I really be able to pass...?

Sirzechs had gone to the trouble of recommending me, so my only option was to live up to his expectations and succeed! And of course, a promotion *was* my ultimate goal! I might have stumbled onto this by doing my own thing, but it was a vital chance! I had to seize it!

“I’ll do my best!” I declared in a show of confidence. “You’ll see, I’ll become a middle-class demon! And then, I’ll become a high-class one!”

The path to becoming a harem king was unfolding before my very eyes! All I needed was to push forward and bury myself in the glorious flesh of beautiful women! Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!

While I rekindled my lecherous ambitions, Rossweisse stood. “Since it would appear that our meeting is adjourned, I think I’ll step out to stretch my legs.”

Now that I looked her over, I realized she was dressed for an outing. I’d been so distracted by everything else that I hadn’t noticed.

“Are you going somewhere, Rossweisse?” I asked.

“The North,” she responded, her gaze distant. “I’m returning home for a little while.”

The North? Going home? What’s all this about?

While I couldn’t quite grasp the situation, Rias seemed to know what was going on.

“Is this about *that*?” she asked.

Rossweisse nodded. “Yes. I don’t think I’m strong enough at present. At this rate, I’ll be nothing more than a hindrance. I need to improve my Rook properties.”

So she was returning to the North to improve her Evil Piece?

“Do you have something specific in mind, Rossweisse?” Azazel questioned.

“Yes. An old colleague of mine is an expert in these matters... When I was a cadet Valkyrie, I studied offensive magic, but it didn’t amount to much in the end.”

Rossweisse clearly had a lot on her mind following the battle against Sairaorg’s Familia, and she seemed to regret not doing better during the fight.

However, she still had a pretty good track record if you asked me. Rossweisse defeated two members of the Bael Familia, and one of her magic attacks even made Sairaorg flinch.

Demonic energy and conventional magic were similar, but they differed in certain areas.

The former was a demon's power to bring about supernatural phenomena. It required the user to envision strong mental images to be fully embodied. The more complex or impressive the technique, the higher the skill level required to realize it.

The latter manipulated supernatural phenomena through rules and formulas. Deploying a magical circle was often helpful for calculating variables in equations.

Originally, magic was developed so that creatures other than demons could wield similar powers according to their own laws and methods. These days, there was greater variety in the number of techniques that people had mastered, and magic could accomplish things that demonic power couldn't. Of course, the inverse was also true. In particular, those unique traits passed down through pure-blooded high-class demon lineages were powers beyond magic's capabilities. Only members of those clans could hope to master such special talents.

So, long story short, demon powers and magic were similar but, at the same time, different. The energy consumed to use magic was known as either magical energy or Buddhist power.

Azazel and Rossweisse had taught me the basics, so even I knew that much! Admittedly, that was the limit of my knowledge, though!

"Given the makeup of the Gremory Familia, a skilled magic user was a good addition," Azazel said. "It might have made more sense to recruit Rossweisse with a Bishop or a Pawn piece to maximize her strength, however. Rias, your team has overwhelming firepower but, broadly speaking, weak defenses. This leaves you vulnerable to cheap techniques and tricks. Your opponents have capitalized on that in your previous matches. In short, you've got more brawn than brains. Your strategy is basically to wipe the floor with your enemies before they can wipe the floor with you. Supplementing that with good magic is a smart idea."

We wore bitter smiles after hearing Azazel's evaluation. Rias was particularly embarrassed. Her cheeks had turned scarlet.

Truthfully, he wasn't wrong. We were all one-on-one attack types, and our

opponents often used their specialist techniques to toy with us. In his post-match impressions, Azazel had even mentioned that our team's composition would lead our opponents to take advantage of our vulnerability in the future.

"Still, there are a lot of fans who like you all the way you are," Sirzechs consoled us. "Tactical teams and those that focus on specific techniques are difficult to judge at first glance, and they're not very flashy on the field, either. Maybe that's why professional fans like them so much."

"Yeah." Azazel nodded. "Rias's and Sairaorg's teams will get better followings in professional matches if they can improve their tactics while still capitalizing on that appeal they've already got."

When he put it that way, it didn't sting as much. We needed to get more professional to help market the Familia.

"Basically, your team needs support abilities to back up your offensive power. So I take it you're all right with Rossweisse heading back to Valhalla for a bit, Rias?" Azazel said.

"Yes. If there are things she wants to improve, there's no reason for me to hold her back," she agreed.

"Thank you," Rossweisse replied gratefully. "Oh, I've already prepared the midterm tests at school, so you don't need to worry about that."

Rias and Akeno both nodded at this report.

"I would have expected no less."

"Impressive. It *is* almost time for the midterms, isn't it?"

Right! There was a test coming up at school, too! The sports festival, the school trip, the academy festival—the second semester of my second year of high school had been one thing after another!

"No way! There's a midterm?! H-how much am I going to have to study?!" I cried.

What was I going to do?! What *could* I do?! I was already book dumb, and now I had two upcoming tests?! Would I even have time for the promotion exam?!

Knowing my turbulent school life, it would definitely keep me from studying.

As I held my head in my hands, Sirzechs turned next to Ravel. “Are you ready to help with the matter we discussed previously?”

“Of course I am, Lord Sirzechs!” she answered without hesitation.

Huh? What’s going on?

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

“Hmm. I thought it might be good to assign Ravel as your assistant, Issei. Your manager, so to speak.”

—.

Thinking back, he’d said something like that before the match against Sairaorg.

“Things are going to get very busy, Issei,” Sirzechs explained. “You have your studies and your performances in the underworld to think about. Grayfia has been managing the affairs of the Gremory household, but she’s only one person. She won’t be able to handle everything going forward, especially the sensitive matters. So I thought it appropriate that you have your own manager. Given how well-versed Ravel is in the underworld and that she’s studying in the human world, I thought she was the most sensible choice.”

Someone to support me? Azazel did say I would need a person like that eventually, and given how many demon kids came to see me when I made appearances as the Breast Dragon, it was easy to envision how the demands on my time would increase in the near future.

My very own manager... I felt like a celebrity. Hold on, aren’t I a celebrity in the underworld? Hmm.

I honestly wasn’t sure. I was famous; that much was true. The idea of becoming popular without realizing it was kind of scary.

“Sorry to start with something like this, Ravel, but could you support Issei during his preparations for the middle-class demon exam?” Sirzechs requested.



At this, Ravel stood confidently and bobbed her head. “Understood. Leave it to me, Ravel Phenex. I’ll make sure Issei gets promoted! I’ll start by collecting all the necessary materials!” she declared, springing into action and rushing from the room.

She was going all in! It was reassuring to have her on my side.

“Your promotion will have a huge impact on Ravel’s life, too,” Azazel remarked.

Ravel, like her parents, seemed very invested in my advancing through the ranks of demon society.

With a mischievous look, Azazel added, “Koneko, if you let your guard down, you’re going to lose your favorite upperclassman to her.”

H-hold on, she’ll think of Ravel as some kind of rival if you keep throwing around comments like that. Don’t fan the flames, Teach!

“...” Koneko remained silent, staring at the floor. Her mind was seemingly elsewhere.

“.....?.....”

The rest of us all tilted our heads to one side in confusion at her lack of response.

Yep, she was acting weird all right. I hoped that she wasn’t sick.

But as worried as I was, I still had those two tests on the horizon! The promotion exam...and the midterm!

The two hurdles were enough to make my head spin!



A few days later, I found myself slumped over in my seat during lunch break, sprawled on my desk, textbooks scattered.

“...Argh, there’s too much to remember,” I grumbled, holding my head in my hands.

Why does trouble always have to come crashing down like an avalanche? That damned Diodora and the old Demon King regime attacked during the sports

festival, Loki showed up before the school trip, and the Hero Faction attacked during it. Then, around the same time as the academy festival, we had our Rating Game match against Sairaorg's Familia.

Now my promotion exam collided with the midterm... No one said life as a demon was easy, I guess...

Every night, after dinner and my demon work, I sat down to study at home. The others all schooled me on different subjects I had to know. Preparing for two tests had my head ready to explode.

Rossweisse had left for Valhalla immediately after the meeting. She'd already laid out the midterm, so she was able to go away for a bit without any trouble. Having her here to monitor my progress would've been nice, though. She tended to give me all sorts of pointers in everyday life.

"Look at that. Issei's actually hitting the books!"

"It's no use. Cramming that brain won't change anything. An idiot's still an idiot."

Matsuda and Motohama, my two bad influences, had appeared, both wearing lewd grins.

"Shut up, Four Eyes. Motohama's different, but you're no better than I am, Matsuda."

Matsuda just laughed. "Ha-ha-ha! At times like this, you should just forget about studying and focus your attention elsewhere! Look!" He pulled out an erotic-looking DVD.

I-is this what they call gentlemen's erotica?! I quickly snatched the box and stared at it.

"Th-this...! Isn't this that hard-to-come-by new hit?! *New Big-Busted Squadron Super Breasts: Explosive Knockers Battle Edition*?! Wh-whoaaaaa! H-how did you get your hands on this?!"

"Personal connections," Motohama answered, his glasses shining. "I had to sacrifice a lot, but it was worth it."

Matsuda wrapped an arm around my shoulder. "Hey, Issei," he whispered

with a disgusting grin. “Forget about the test and come to my place. We can have a viewing party. Your house is filled with girls, so you won’t be able to watch it there, yeah?”

He was right. There was hardly any privacy at home these days. I certainly didn’t have the luxury of enjoying naughty goods anymore... I spent my nights with Rias and Asia, and the others liked to come to my room at all hours to hang out, too. In fact, we ended up playing all kinds of games and having little tournaments. Honestly, it was pretty fun.

However, as a result, there were few opportunities to indulge in erotic products. Now, you might think that, living with so many beautiful girls, I was closer to the feminine form than ever. And, well, I can’t exactly deny it, but this was different, okay? I really, *really* wanted to watch that sexy DVD!

What was the point of being a healthy high school boy if you couldn’t watch a good piece of porn every now and then?!

“All right. Matsuda’s place it is, then.”

No sooner had the words left my lips than a new figure appeared, snatching the case from my grip.

A bespectacled young woman—Kiryuu.

“What do we have here? There’s a test coming up, but I suppose the Perverted Trio never changes. Hmm. This looks interesting... What do you think, Asia?”

Asia was standing right next to Kiryuu! Whyyyyyyyy?! She examined the cover, her face turning bright red.

“Whaaaaa—?! Issei! A-another naughty video?! How many is it now?!”

Hold on, she knows about my collection?! The girls staying at my house monitored me too closely! I was always out looking for fresh stimulation!

Xenovia stepped over next, taking a keen interest in the DVD. “You know, I checked out his collection with Asia and Irina. There’s some variety, but they all end with sex. I’m not sure I get the point of so many. What do you think, Irina?”

Irina as well?! They all watched my collection together?! What the hell?!

“R-Rias and Akeno did say the buildup and atmosphere are important! That must be why!”

“Hmm. Atmosphere, huh? Yeah, I think I get it. Just being held by a guy isn’t enough for a woman to enjoy it. Is that what you mean, Irina?”

“Hey, don’t ask *me*! I’m a Christian woman! But I *am* intrigued... Ah, please forgive my conflicted maiden’s heart, O Lord!”

Irina held her head in her hands before falling to her knees in prayer. Ever the active devotee, that one.

Wait. Does this mean that Rias and Akeno had seen my collection?!

But I’d hidden it so perfectly in that empty room’s closet! How’d they find it? The discs were still organized, so I hadn’t noticed anything amiss the last time I checked!

My private life was exposed, and my shame was revealed to all!

Matsuda and Motohama both chuckled weakly, casting me sympathetic looks. Damn it! Oh, how I envied them, being able to freely watch erotic DVDs in the peace and comfort of their own bedrooms!

“I—I’ll be naughty, too! Don’t worry, Issei!” Asia declared.

Kiryuu grinned suggestively.

Damn herrrrrr! Who knew Kiryuu had so much influence on Asia?! If my cute little nun has turned naughty... Actually, that might be a wonderful development!

—.

My phone began to vibrate in my pocket. After pulling it out, I remembered that it was going off because I’d set an alarm earlier.

“Ah, medicine time,” I said while standing up from my cluttered desk.

“Huh? You’re not well?” Matsuda asked.

No, it wasn’t for me.

“Sorry, I’ve got to step outside for a bit,” I said. Then I made for the home economics room, which was typically empty this time of day.

Once I'd determined there was no one around, I activated my gauntlet and retrieved a small vial near the sink, sprinkling its contents on the jewel.

"How's that, Ddraig?"

"...Yeah, that soothes the heart."

Ddraig sounded like he was calming down. He'd fallen into a bit of a depression lately, probably because I kept achieving new power-ups via breasts.

Azazel had introduced Ddraig to a professional counselor, who prescribed this medicine to help the dragon with his mental health.

A powerful creature with his own sense of will, Ddraig was functionally still sealed within my Sacred Gear. Fortunately, this medicine meant specifically for dragons did seem to be working. His mood appeared much improved compared to before.

Dragons locked inside Sacred Gears were pretty rare, and it was probably even more uncommon to find one dealing with depression...

I was always causing Ddraig trouble. Enough that he'd sought therapy. I never imagined that a Heavenly Dragon would be so sensitive or that my constant, reckless upgrades might wound him.

"I'm glad the prescription is helping, but...a medicated Heavenly Dragon... What would the White think if he knew...?"

Don't mock yourself, Ddraig... I'm so sorry!

He saw the therapist once a week and took medicine three times a day.

Ddraig, I'll watch over you my whole life if I have to!

"He-he-he. So it'll be ten thousand years like this...?"

Like I said, I'm sorry! Be strong!

I knew the encouragement didn't sound persuasive at all coming from me.

Helping Ddraig was difficult on its own, but I was also juggling two tests. Outside of battle, life was getting surprisingly hectic... Azazel assigning me a manager was definitely the right call. My high school life was spiraling out of control.

After a deep sigh, I exited the home economics room. And that's when I bumped into him.

"Hyoudou?"

"Ah, Saji."

Yep, I had walked right into Saji.

"You brought a Heavenly Dragon to tears?" Saji said, exhaling deeply after learning about the situation with Ddraig.

We had made our way to the student council room, where Saji helped himself to a cup of tea. "You know, if he can't keep it together, it'll be a huge issue when Vritra goes berserk."

"Dragons are sensitive creatures. Not exactly easy to handle."

I hoped that sounded appropriate... I was hardly an authority.

Saji nodded along in agreement, though.

Well, it *was* hard work being the host of a legendary dragon. I wondered how Azazel was doing with Fafnir. Maybe I'd ask him next time I had a chance.

"Oh, right. I heard you've been recommended for a promotion. Congrats," Saji offered.

"Ah, thanks. It's all so sudden. To tell you the truth, I still can't believe it."

"Well, it makes sense to me. You've survived some pretty nasty stuff. I was there during the battle against Loki and the one in Kyoto, so I know. Anyone else would've died during those incidents. You were up against myths and legends."

And yet, somehow, I'd survived all of them. I owed it all to Ddraig and my dependable friends. Still, we only barely survived the fights. Why did I keep getting caught up in major conflicts...? I just wanted to live a quiet, erotic life!

"You lived and won, so yeah, I think the promotion makes sense. Are you guys skipping a few ranks? You and Kiba have to be high-class-demon level in terms of strength."

"No, we'll be going for middle-class ranks first."

“Eh? So the higher-ups aren’t willing to be a little flexible? The chairwoman said it was possible you, Kiba, and Akeno might skip straight to high-ranking demons. You’re the Red Dragon Emperor, Kiba’s got his Holy Demon Swords, and Akeno has her Holy Lightning, after all.”

So that was how people saw us. Even Azazel and others had said it was only a matter of time until we advanced in standing again. Everyone really thought highly of our accomplishments.

“You and Kiba are both stupidly strong. I tried sparring with him a little not long ago, but he was too much. My attacks couldn’t touch him. He’s like an ideal Technique-style fighter, if you ask me. And you’ve been practicing with him every day, right? You two are both monsters.”

That felt a little weird coming from Saji, who could transform into a literal Dragon King... He was right about Kiba, though. Dedicating myself to getting stronger was the only way to match him. Saji must have been stunned when he saw Kiba’s incredible speed. Not even my attacks could hit him reliably.

“I’m hoping to get a promotion, too, but I need to get stronger first,” Saji admitted with a bitter smile.

“Don’t doubt yourself. You’re definitely powerful already. Plus, you’ve got Vritra,” I assured my friend.

“It’s more than that. Everyone in the Sitri Familia is striving to improve. Recently, the chairwoman was even discussing artificial Sacred Gears with the Grigori earlier.”

“Artificial Sacred Gears?”

Azazel had one of those. He’d created it by reverse engineering the Sacred Gears designed by the Biblical God.

“Yeah, we’ve been helping with Azazel’s experiments,” Saji continued. “Next time, we’re going to try equipping one of our members who doesn’t have a Sacred Gear with an artificial one.”

“Wow. That sounds amazing.”

“The power output of artificial Sacred Gears isn’t as stable as the real ones,

though, and there's a limit on how many times you can use them. There's still lots of room for improvement. However, there's no question that we'll be able to use them to get stronger. Besides, if research continues, these artificial Sacred Gears might help bolster the strength of all demons someday. Oh, but we're not using that reversal technique anymore. It burdens the user's body too heavily, and if someone with a real Sacred Gear gets close, it could cause a bad reaction."

Apparently, the whole student council was helping with Azazel's experiments.

"There's a lot of variation between artificial Sacred Gears. I won't be getting another one, of course, but it's still fun to learn about the different types, don't you think? There are power and support categories, then subtypes focusing on specific attributes. Countering specific abilities, raising barriers, you name it. And there are others with creatures sealed inside them like ours, and others formed through contracts with monsters."

Azazel's artificial Sacred Gear had been made via a contract with the Gigantis Dragon Fafnir, one of the Five Great Dragon Kings, who presently resided inside it.

I wasn't really familiar with the different kinds of Sacred Gears and tended to focus on my own. I decided I'd ask Azazel for a few lessons when I had the chance.

While thinking about Sacred Gears, the other student council members—in other words, the Sitri Familia—arrived.

"Ah, it's Hyoudou," the Bishop Kusaka, her hair tied in twin braids, remarked. "Congratulations on the promotion!"

""Congrats!"" the others added a moment later.

"Thanks! I'll do my best on the exam," I answered.

"Genshirou," the first-year Pawn named Nimura said to Saji. "The chairwoman wanted you to fetch that document."

"Ah, *that*. Right. On it."

"Gen?" called the second-year Bishop Hanakai. "I also have a request for you

from the chairwoman.”

“Seriously, Hanakai? Guess today’s going to be busy... I’ll start with the easiest jobs first. Gotta go, Hyoudou. Take it easy.” Saji left with Nimura and Hanakai.

Yura the Rook and Kusaka the Bishop had told me that Momo Hanakai, a second-year student, and Ruruko Nimura, a first-year, were fighting over Saji. From what I understood, a fierce battle was raging beneath the surface.

Hanakai was the girl who’d managed to drain my blood during the Rating Game match against the Sitri Familia. Nimura was the one Koneko had defeated.

Hanakai was originally a fan of Kiba’s, but she was reasonable and realized that he was effectively out of reach. She had since shifted her attention to the hardworking Saji, perhaps because they worked so closely as members of the same Familia.

Nimura, on the other hand, had always supported Saji with student council and demon work. She must have fallen for him after seeing how earnestly he applied himself.

Guess he was having a rough go of things, too. I couldn’t help but nod at my brother-in-arms and his love interests while enjoying a cup of tea.

Yura came over holding a blank piece of paper. “Hyoudou, can I have your autograph?”

“Mine? Sure, I guess. If that’s what you want.”

“Of course. I saw the recording of your match against the Bael Familia. I was deeply moved. It was the greatest fight I’ve ever seen.”

Apparently, she was a fan of mine. The last time I spoke with her, the topic of the male demons at Kuou Academy had come up, and she’d mentioned that I was her type. Something about liking rough-cut men, the kind lacking polish. Was I rough cut...? I did tend to get into fights, so I understood why I gave off that impression.

Yura was actually popular with the girls at Kuou Academy on account of her pretty-boy kind of face. Don’t get me wrong, though, she was an incredible

beauty. Meguri, a Knight of the Sitri Familia, was more into Gasper. Word was that she liked underclassmen.

“I like them young,” Meguri proclaimed with a serious face!

“I’m still more into Kiba,” Kusaka asserted.

Vice-Chairwoman Tsubaki was another of Kiba’s admirers, perhaps even more into him than Kusaka. My understanding was that she started crushing on him after he beat her during our match. Could love sprout from defeat?

“Do you want me to introduce you to him when we get a chance?” I offered to the pair.

“Really?!” Kusaka exclaimed, overjoyed by this suggestion. “But you should probably introduce the vice-chairwoman first. She’s crazy about him.”

Ah, right. So power politics between upper-and underclassmen still applied in matters of romance.

What? Why am I acting like that damn pretty boy’s wingman?! Honestly, for all his popularity with girls, Kiba still didn’t have a girlfriend. As his friend, I guess I just wanted to help.

So it was that I found myself chatting with the members of the student council. The girls of the Gremory and Sitri Familias had been interacting more frequently as of late. As far as I could tell, that was only a good thing. There weren’t a lot of demons at Kuou Academy, and it was nice they all got along.

“Hyoudou?” came a fresh voice.

Glancing over my shoulder, I spotted Chairwoman Sona.

“Ah, hello, Chairwoman.”

“Hello,” she responded coolly. “Everyone, I know we have a guest, but I need to ask you all to assist with some errands. Tsubaki is having difficulty in the club building.”

““““Okay,”””” the others replied.

“See you later, Hyoudou.”

With that, the student council members left the room—leaving only the

chairwoman and me!

This was my first time alone with her! I was getting nervous! The room had fallen eerily silent, yet Chairwoman Sona took her seat and read through some assorted documents as if it were nothing.

“...”

Feeling out of place, I decided to make my exit. And that’s when she spoke up.

“I hear you confessed to Rias.”

She wants to talk about that?!

“Did Ri—I mean, did the prez tell you?”

“Yes. We’ve been friends since we were little. Lately, we’ve had some long chats via magic, and she’s told me all about her love life.”

Seriously?! I didn’t know what to say.

“Ha-ha-ha... Um, wow...”

I did my best to force a smile and meet the chairwoman’s stare.

“You’ve accomplished things I never could,” she stated.

“...What do you mean?”

“The engagement, the incident with Riser Phenex, everything with Yuuto Kiba, Gasper, Koneko, and Akeno... You’ve helped lessen every burden Rias carries... I’ve been by her side longer than you have, but I haven’t been able to help at all. I *couldn’t*. There was always one reason or another. Traditions, high-class demon customs; I could never overcome excuses like those. My excess concern for my position and the gazes of those watching from the sidelines kept me paralyzed.”

It made total sense that the chairwoman was concerned for Rias. They’d been friends forever.

“Yet you resolved everything without even thinking about it. I was so happy when I heard the news... But I was jealous, too. You resolved so much that I never could. So I want to thank you for saving Rias.”

The chairwoman paused for a moment to let out a long exhale, her expression relaxing. “Listen, Hyoudou... No, maybe I should call you Issei when we’re alone. Please take care of Rias. I know she can be selfish, stubborn, and short-tempered, but she’s more sensitive than anyone else I know. She needs someone who can support her. And I want to leave that task to you.”

“Yes! I’ll look after Ri—the prez!”

Of course I would! She was incredibly important to me!

“You can call her by name when it’s just us. We both care about her a lot. You should address me as *Sona*, too.”

“Th-that might be a bit much...!”

The chairwoman let out a resigned sigh. “Haven’t Rias and Akeno already complained to you for not using their names in private?”

“Huh?! H-how do you know that?!”

Was she a mind reader?! Who spilled the beans?!

The chairwoman giggled softly at my reaction. She had a cute smile. This girl was typically so cool and reserved. That gap between her usual attitude and the one she had now gave off a unique kind of charm that nearly sucked me in. I understood why Saji fell in love with her!

“A gentleman knows how to separate private from public when dealing with a woman.”

“I see... I think...”

“You know, I’ve been considering taking a boyfriend recently,” the chairwoman admitted.

Whoa, *that* was news!

“How about Saji?” I suggested. Did he have a chance?

“He’s a bit like a little brother. Besides, others in my Familia are attracted to him, so I shouldn’t claim him as mine.”

Ah, I guess it’s still a no-go for now. Saji, your dream is still on the distant horizon!

“Your Rating Game was brilliant, by the way. I’m amazed you’ve grown strong enough to defeat Sairaorg Bael.”

“Th-thank you. But it took four of us to beat him... He’s super strong.”

“Even so, your team took the victory. It was nothing less than splendid.”

Man, I was sure getting a lot of praise today. This was a new experience for me.

The chairwoman’s team was impressive, too. She hadn’t finished building out her Familia yet, but they’d defeated Seekvaira Agares. The chairwoman had expert tactics and a perfect grasp of Rating Game rules. In a way, her Familia was the polar opposite of Rias’s.

“Anyway, please take care of Rias, Issei. Oh, and congratulations on being recommended for promotion.”

“Thank you! Leave Rias and the exam to me!”

“Indeed. I have high expectations for you. Do your best. That goes for the midterm as well,” she said with a smile.

Seeing such a cute expression grace her usually reserved face was proof enough that we had succeeded in opening up to each other.

It felt nice to hear her honest adulation.

Now that my spirits were raised, it was time to focus on the midterm and the promotion exam!



“Oh? You spoke with Sona?”

While Rias and I were relaxing in the living room after dinner, I told her about my conversation with the chairwoman.

“Yeah. And it left me wondering something. Does Chairwoman Sona not have a fiancé?”

She, too, was from a noble house, and children of such families often had arranged marriages.

“She did,” Rias answered.

“Did?”

“She broke it off like I did. It was a while ago now. Apparently, she challenged him to ten rounds of chess on the condition that if she won, the marriage would be called off, and if he won, she would quit school and wed him immediately. She wasn’t willing to give her life to someone who couldn’t keep up with her mentally.”

I had no idea. That meant the chairwoman was completely single. That explained her interest in finding a boyfriend.

“I’m guessing she won the contest, then?”

Rias nodded. “Overwhelmingly. She stomped the guy’s pride into the dirt. This is the same Sona who defeated Seekvaira Agares—normal minds don’t stand a chance against her. If I was to challenge her to chess, I would lose more rounds than I would win.”

She was that good? We’d never lose to the Sitri Familia in a contest of raw power. However, Rating Games were largely about strategy... And the chairwoman’s Familia wasn’t even complete yet. How incredible would they be with a full lineup? The chairwoman still had a few Pawn pieces, a Knight, and a Rook to spare.

Maybe Rias knew what I was thinking because she said, “By the way, she told me that she’s found candidates for her Knight and Rook pieces. Negotiations are ongoing, it seems.”

Ohhh. So the Sitri Familia is finally increasing its ranks! Given how much the chairwoman focused on tactics, maybe she’d searched for members with tricky and unique abilities? Or perhaps she was after Power-type fighters? If they were beauties, I wanted to get to know them! I couldn’t stop imagining what they might be like.

“Now then, Issei.” Ravel had appeared out of nowhere with a stack of books at some point! She laid the mountain of volumes down on the table with an audible thump. “I’ve gathered as many textbooks and reference volumes as I could for the promotion exam! And I’ve made a separate pile for the midterm at Kuou.”

Ravel was nothing if not efficient. She managed to find new textbooks every day!

“Oh dear, it looks like it’s study time again,” Akeno said as she entered the room.

“Whoa, study time? I’d better prep for the test, too!”

“Me too!”

“I have to study as well!”

Xenovia, Irina, and Asia all joined in succession.

Recently, everyone had taken to gathering for test prep around this time. Akeno and I studied for the promotion exam and the midterm, while the others focused solely on the latter.

Kiba didn’t live at my place, but I wondered if he’d eventually join our study group.

Rias opened one of the textbooks. “Then shall we get started?”

Maybe it was me, but it felt like she was looking for someone.

“Is Koneko still unwell?”

Right, Koneko was absent. She seemed to be under the weather lately.

Unfortunately, we had to start without her.

“...Ah, there aren’t enough hours in the day...”

With the latest study session and my demon work done, I threw myself facedown on my bed.

Physically, I was exhausted, and mentally, I was even worse. During my demon work, I had to pedal my bicycle from place to place while reading from a vocabulary book held in one hand... Thankfully, I could see in the dark.

Technically, the day wasn’t even done yet. I had more studying to do before bed. With both tests looming, I had to push myself to the limit. Being a demon, I was confident I had the physical strength, but there was a *lot* to memorize. I was worried my brain would explode.

Right now, Rias and the other girls were putting together a late-night snack to nourish our spirits for the upcoming study session. She stayed up late to support me every night. Rias was amazing! Admittedly, I'd heard she was slipping out of class during the day to catch up on sleep in the infirmary... But still, that girl was a miracle!

Confessing to her and having her reciprocate still felt too good to be true. I loved this wonderful life! Studying together made me want to get down and dirty with her!

Hmm. Would a kiss be okay? How about more...naughty stuff...? No, I'm supposed to be studying right now! I have to put aside these vulgar desires and hit the books like a wizened sage!

But if I pass, maybe we can do something raunchy as a reward?

Ah! And what about that DVD-viewing party at Matsuda's place?!

Am I not allowed to go?! Nooooo! I want to see it! I really want to see it! Why am I the only one left out?! Life was so unfair!

Dirty feelings kept on welling up inside me! I was close to my limit! Ugh, keeping everything bottled up couldn't be healthy. Perhaps I needed a way to exorcise my youthful vigor before the late-night studying...

Just as I reached for the erotic magazine that I kept in the hidden storage space under my bed, I heard the door swinging open!

—! Who is it?! Rias?! Asia?!

Glancing over my shoulder, I laid eyes on Koneko, dressed in white. Her cat ears and tail were showing. Why was she in her *nekomata* mode now? She'd taken the night off from demon work to rest. As I looked at her now, she didn't appear to have a cold. I knew she wasn't having any issues using her sage magic, either...

Her face was slightly pink...enchanted, almost...

As she approached, she tugged at the hem of her white robe almost as though she were entranced.

...

And she wasn't wearing anything underneath!

My mouth hung open in shock.

Sh-sh-she wasn't wearing any panties...!

Koneko climbed onto the bed and wrapped herself around me. Her breath was quick, and as she pressed her soft body against me, I could feel a thin layer of sweat on her.

"Issei...," she whispered in my ear. "I'm hurting inside..." She took my hand and placed it on her breast—small, but unmistakably soft. Then there came the sweetest of sounds: "Nghhhhh..."

—! *What is going on here?! What is this?!* I was left stupefied by this sudden erotic turn! I couldn't hide my confusion at her seductive behavior! I would never have expected Koneko to start acting like Rias or Akeno!

Huh...? I could feel her tongue running down my neck...! What was with those tongue movements?! They were too sensual!

Then, eyes wet and voice quivering, Koneko whispered, "Issei...I..."

"Yes?" I asked.

"I want a baby."

...

.....

A b-b-b-b-baby?!

What?! A baby?! Just like that?! My sweet little Koneko was acting just like Xenovia! And her expression was crazy seductive!

Her white robe had practically fallen off by this point, leaving her almost totally naked as she sat atop me! Her gorgeous, petite breasts were floating before my very eyes!

This was outrageous! Here I was fantasizing about doing all kinds of naughty things when Koneko appeared out of nowhere saying she wanted to make a baby with me! It was too sensual, too erotic!

And yet...there was something clearly wrong. Koneko seemed feverish, and I

sensed a faint shadow in her eyes.

She wasn't her normal self at all. And right as I came to that realization, the door clicked open and Rias stepped onto the scene!

Nooooo! Before I could do anything, her gaze fell on Koneko and me!

Rias rushed forward immediately.

Uh-oh, is she mad?! Is she going to kill us?!

To my surprise, however, Rias placed a hand on Koneko's neck, stared into her eyes, and then lightly touched her chest and stomach. She stood contemplating something for a moment before pulling out her cell phone. "Do you remember Abe from the tennis club?" she asked out of nowhere.

"Huh...? Y-yeah. That monster tamer, right?"

She was the one with that dream-wrecking *yuki-onna*, Christie. That high-handed girl from the tennis club.

"I'm going to call her. Abe will know more about how to help a *nekomata* than we do."

Rias sounded serious. She didn't seem interested in admonishing Koneko or me for this perverted development. Koneko's health was her prime concern.

"U-um, what's going on...?" I questioned.

"Let's just get her to a specialist."

Maybe it was my imagination, but I got the feeling Rias already had some idea of what was behind Koneko's odd behavior. She called Abe without bothering to explain it to me, though.

What had happened to our little Koneko?

Life.2

The Infinite and the Middle-Class Demon Promotion Exam!

“So it’s *nekomata* mating season, is it?” Azazel remarked. He’d hurried to my place after hearing about the situation from one of the others.

After the incident in my bedroom, Rias called Abe over to examine Koneko. Apparently, mating season was the diagnosis.

Koneko was acting instinctively, her body compelling her to produce offspring.

Thankfully, Abe had prepared a special tonic to soothe the poor girl’s nerves. Koneko was sound asleep in her room right now. Leave it to a monster tamer to know how to handle a situation like this. Abe possessed a wealth of knowledge about all sorts of creatures and *youkai*.

And so we other members of the Familia, along with Azazel, had gathered in the VIP room deep in my house.

“Mating season...?” I muttered.

Like what cats went through? Well, *nekomata* were cat *youkai*. Was that why she had come after me like that?

“Once their bodies have developed sufficiently to bear children, *nekomata* start going into heat at certain intervals,” Azazel explained. “In other words, instinct kicks in and compels them to desire babies. And in the case of a *nekomata*, they choose males of a different species, ones that they’ve taken a liking to. In this case, you, Issei.”

M-me...? I pointed wordlessly at myself.

Azazel nodded. “Koneko is a rare variant of *nekomata*—a *nekoshou*. If you ask me, it would be wise to give her some offspring. There’s no better father than the Red Dragon Emperor, right? That said...” Azazel sighed deeply. “She’s still a

little small.”

Right, her breasts are still very petite, I thought to myself as I snuck a glimpse at Rias’s and Akeno’s busts.

“He means her whole body,” Rias stated with exasperation after noticing my gaze.

Sorry for always focusing on people’s breasts! They were just such a feast for the eyes!

“So she’s not big enough to have kids?” I asked.

“Yeah. It’s dangerous for a cat to give birth before it’s physically and mentally mature. Even here in the human world, childbirth isn’t exactly easy on the mother’s body, is it now? And Koneko is still immature. There’s too high a risk that she and the child would die during the birth.”

I remembered Koneko insisting that even though her body was small, she was still fully capable of bearing children... Was she exaggerating? Trying to deceive herself? Then again, maybe she *could* bear children, but it came with high risks. Her body simply wasn’t ready yet. Yet if that was the case, why had she instinctively gone into heat?

After an examination, Abe had concluded, “I think Toujou’s estrous cycle may have come a little early, physically speaking.”

“If that’s true, shouldn’t a *nekoshou* realize they’re not ready for it yet?” I asked. “Why is Koneko—”

“As another woman living in this house, I understand her predicament,” Akeno interjected. She looked to the gathered others in turn. “I’m sure Issei and Rias’s relationship must have spurred her to it. In other words, she was driven by a strong compulsion not to lose.”

—. *My relationship with Rias?*

We each glanced at each other. Was this connected to my confession, to what existed between the two of us...? Did Koneko feel like she had to act quickly or risk losing out...?

A-and she chose me? I was honored! But in her current state, pregnancy

would be too heavy a burden. There was no way that I could put her life in danger.

“She went into heat prematurely because of me and Issei...?” Rias muttered with clear remorse. She sounded startled. Maybe she blamed her own feelings for causing this.

Honestly, I could’ve been a little more considerate to Koneko. Perhaps if I’d doted on her a bit more, things would be different... But ever since confessing my feelings for Rias, I’d had eyes only for her...

Sensing the uneasy atmosphere, Azazel rubbed the back of his head. “Anyway, suppressing Koneko’s instincts isn’t going to do her any good. If we keep subduing them through medication, there’s a chance they won’t come back properly after she matures.”

That was a problem. We would solve the issue in the short term, but we could risk adverse effects by relying too much on Abe’s remedy.

Azazel pointed at me. “You’ll have to restrain yourself until her condition has stabilized.”

“M-me?” I asked.

“That’s right. *Your* mating season is year-round, but if you care about Koneko’s well-being, you’ll have to resist the temptation. Just keep reminding yourself she could die if you sleep with her; that ought to help.”

Th-the stakes were certainly high, but how was I supposed to keep from getting excited when a girl tried to seduce me?! Azazel was demanding that I suffer torture!

Yep, this was turning into a huge deal! The future looked delectable, yet I had an arduous trial ahead! I could already sense the bittersweet taste just thinking about it...

Rias grabbed my hand as I shook with trepidation.

“Please, Issei. Don’t get Koneko pregnant, okay? Besides, we still haven’t...”

“R-right. I’ll bear it! I won’t succumb until she’s back to her usual self!”

When the woman I loved asked me to do something, my only option was to

give it my all!

“If you stay strong, I’ll reward you once it’s all over. Okay?”

—! *Seriously?! I was jumping for joy at this new prospect!*

“You mean it?!”

“Yes, I do. And because it’s you, Issei, it will be something naughty. Hee-hee-hee.” Rias wore a faint smile.

Whoa! If I can withstand Koneko’s wiles, Rias will grant me an incredible reward!

No, that part’s great and all, but my priority has to be sealing off my perverted side to protect my precious underclassman!

For a lecherous teenager like me, that won’t be an easy ask... But if Rias demands it of me, I would obey...!

“I understand,” I said, gently squeezing Rias’s hand. “I’ll get through this for the reward—no, for Koneko!”

“Thank you, darling Issei.”

“Of course.”

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

Rias and I continued to stare at one another for a bit. Ah, I loved this woman... And our feelings were mutual...! I would never forget the day I laid my heart bare to her! Yes, she and I were already one!

“Come on, you two. Enough with the lovey-dovey crap.”

Huh?! Only when Azazel spoke did I realize how lost Rias and I were in each other’s eyes. I averted my gaze, while my cheeks grew hot.

Hah. I just couldn’t help myself.

“Show-offs. Save that for when you’re alone. Right, everyone?” Azazel cast a look at Asia and the others.

“No. Knowing what they’re doing gives a certain piece of mind.”

“I thought it was so nice, you know? Watching them is relaxing in a vicarious sort of way.”

“Yes. It took them a long while to reach this point. And when they look at one another, it’s like a huge field of flowers bursts into bloom around them!”

Asia, Xenovia, and Irina nodded in agreement as they all offered embarrassing comments.

Stop! Just thinking about it made me want to run away and hide!

“Oh-ho-ho, another point in favor of entering into an affair,” Akeno said with a suggestive grin.

What kind of *point* was she talking about?! It sounded simultaneously seductive and terrifying!

Ravel chuckled. “If I took a video of that scene and sent it to Riser, he would probably die in agony. Heh.”

Ravel! Don’t bully your brother!

“...Damn, Issei. You sure are blessed to have so many great women...,” Azazel remarked. “Oh, there’s something else I need to report—Akeno, Baraqiel’s given his approval. I think it’s a good idea, too. The rest is up to you.”

“Father...I understand. I won’t cause my Familia any more trouble. Gasper is doing his utmost, so I need to as well,” Akeno replied with determination.

Rias wore a knowing look... Had Akeno asked her father for something?

Azazel nodded, and his voice turned formal. “All right... Putting that aside, I want you all to listen closely. We’re planning on hosting some visitors here tomorrow. Rias, sorry for the short notice, but I’ll need your permission.”

“Oh? This is the first I’ve heard of it.”

That went for me, too. Hold on, why did she have the final say on who was allowed into my family’s house...? Well, considering how much remodeling she’d done, the building was more hers than mine at this point.

“Yeah, there’s just one issue...” Azazel sounded serious. “You’re all definitely not going to like them. I wouldn’t be surprised if you guys want to murder the

guests when you see them.”

They're that bad?! There aren't that many people in the world we all hate. Who could these people be?

We each glanced at one another in alarm. If Azazel was this confident we'd be upset with the visitors...

...they had to be from Team Vali.

“Issei, I'm guessing you've got a certain group in mind? You're half correct.”

“—! Vali and his people are coming here again, Teach?”

During the battle against Loki, Team Vali used my family's home as their base of operations. We'd formed a temporary alliance at the time, which kept us from fighting. But to be honest, Vali and his comrades were still our enemies. The way things were, it wouldn't be unexpected if we all started killing each other on sight.

Then again, we'd bumped into Team Vali on several occasions, and I hadn't felt *particularly* homicidal toward them.

“Vali is a terrorist. We cooperated with him once, but we're prepared to fight if he shows his face here again,” Rias declared, as though sharing my thoughts. “I've been told his team aided people in Kyoto during the attack. I still consider him and his group as adversaries... But I don't think they're quite as dangerous as the Hero Faction. I'm prepared to meet them...but we'll be on high alert.”

“I know you've got a complicated relationship with Team Vali,” Azazel said with a sigh as he scratched his head. “It's just... Well, there's something else I can't really share right now. Please wait until tomorrow morning; it'll all be made clear then. For now, I have to ask you not to attack them. That's all. Hear them out... If it goes well, this little meeting might change the whole balance of power. I'll come by early tomorrow. Remember what I said. Please.” Azazel lowered his head once he was finished.

Seeing him go so far was pretty unusual. Naturally, we remained skeptical. How many people were coming? Would they all be associated with Team Vali?

We took our doubts and misgivings to bed and prepared ourselves for the

coming encounter.



It was morning when I heard the intercom ring. I opened the door nervously, only to find a slender young girl in a black gothic Lolita outfit.

I hadn't seen her in a while, but I could never forget who this was!

"It's been a while, Ddraig," the girl greeted me calmly.

I fell back a step, pointing a finger straight at her!

"O-O-O-O-Oooooooooooooooooooooohis?!"

My scream could be heard all through the house!

Wh-wh-wh-wh-what's going on?! This isn't who I was expecting! Completely out of left field!

It had to be a joke! My shock was powerful enough to flip Heaven and earth upside down!

The other Familia members, gathered behind me at the entrance, immediately readied themselves for combat! I similarly activated my gauntlet, debating whether or not to start my Balance Breaker countdown!

Could you blame us? I-i-it was *her*! The leader of the Khaos Brigade, enemy of the three great powers, was standing in front of me! Wasn't she the final boss?! Her popping up here was totally unfair! This should have been impossible!

Ophis was supposed to be the strongest being in the whole world, the ultimate enemy as far as every major faction was concerned!

So what was she doing dropping by the Hyoudou residence?!

Was this place really so famous that the final boss decided to pop in?!

Her unexpected visit raised a lot of questions, and I could feel the urge to act rising!

Thankfully, Azazel stepped between us. "Hey, hey, hey! I thought I made myself clear last night! No attacking our guests! She's not going to fight you! Heck, even if she did, we wouldn't stand a chance!"

That only got Rias furious. "This is absurd, Azazel! That dragon is the leader of

a terrorist group! Given the amount of destruction she's causing in the underworld, it's completely within reason to brand her our archnemesis! And you've invited her *here*?! Into this town, so important to our alliance? Into this house?!"

My thoughts exactly! This town was where the peace accord between Heaven and the underworld had been forged, and it was an important site for negotiations with other powers in the world. Angels, fallen angels, and demons all worked to maintain the peace in this community.

Azazel must have convinced everyone to overlook Ophis's presence. It was the only way she could come. That, or he'd tricked everybody. Irina looked pretty astonished, so the forces of Heaven had probably been ignorant of this. It was news to us demons as well. If the higher-ups had been informed, Sirzechs definitely would have mentioned it ahead of time.

Basically, Azazel had arranged Ophis's visit without consulting Sirzechs or Michael.

Rias likely realized this as well, because she shouted, "This is a violation of the terms of our alliance, Azazel! The fallen angels will be condemned if the Demon Kings or Archangel Michael hear of this! How could you? You, who came to *us* asking for cooperation...?" She took a moment to calm herself, exhaling deeply. "You're the one always talking about alliances. I can only assume bringing Ophis here is worth jeopardizing everything we've built?"

After everything we'd been through together, there was no reason to doubt Azazel anymore. He'd been shady and hostile when I first met him, but I'd come to trust the governor of the fallen angels. He helped me break past so many obstacles.

We'd all benefited and grown, thanks to his knowledge. It was hard to imagine that someone so reliable and wise could betray us.

Enraged though she was, Rias understood this and was willing to listen.

"Yeah. I'm sorry, Rias. I had to deceive everyone to bring Ophis here. But you've got to understand, what she wants could change the very nature of the Khaos Brigade... I decided that this was vital to stop more unnecessary bloodshed. Sorry, but I ask you to please hear her out."

With that, Azazel lowered his head.

This was more than his usual cavalier attitude. He undoubtedly felt deeply about this if it meant taking on such a tremendous risk.

“I trust him,” I said, deactivating my gauntlet. “Teach is the reason I’m here, after all.”

The others each exchanged glances, and ultimately put away their weapons.

“You’re always looking out for me, Teach. I want to cut Ophis down where she stands... But I’ll put up with her,” Xenovia said, folding her arms and closing her eyes.

“To invite Ophis without telling Lord Michael...,” Irina muttered. “I honestly don’t know what to do. I suppose I have no choice but to trust you and Rias.” Despite evidently mixed feelings, she gave her consent. As a representative of Heaven, Irina was in the most difficult position of all. Still, she was willing to try listening. This was clear proof that she trusted Azazel.

“I believe in Issei and Rias,” Asia said.

“Same goes for me,” Ravel agreed.

If I had to guess, Kiba and Gasper, who weren’t here yet; Koneko, who was still sound asleep; and Rossweisse, who’d gone back to Valhalla for a bit, would have felt the same way.

Rias let out a long sigh. “So shall I bring her upstairs and serve tea? Is it just Ophis? What about the rest of Team Vali?”

No sooner had she finished the question than a burst of light erupted by the entrance, forming a magic circle.

From that radiance emerged Team Vali’s robed mage Le Fay and a large dog covered in ash gray fur.

Le Fay aside, I recognized that dog! I’d never forget the terrible chill he sent down my spine! Sure, he was smaller now, but there was no mistaking him! It was Fenrir, a wolf whose fangs could slay literal gods! Yeah, I’d heard something about him joining Vali’s group, but I didn’t want to believe it!

“Greetings, everyone. It is I, Le Fay Pendragon. Thank you for your assistance

in Kyoto. My friend here is Little Fenrir,” the soft-spoken witch said in polite greeting.

Fenrir seemed to be fond of Le Fay and didn't appear hostile toward us, thankfully. Then again, he was a legendary monster, so we couldn't relax too much!

Another magic square formed, and this time, a glamorous young woman made her entrance! As soon as she appeared, she embraced me with a warm hug!

Whoa! I—I could feel her plump breasts pushing up against my body!

“Long time no see, Red Dragon Emperor! You're still totally into boobs, I hope?”

It was Koneko's older sister, Kuroka! Damn it! Those tits were incredible!

“Kuroka?! Y-you're here, too?!”

It didn't look like anyone else from their group was about to appear. Vali and Bikou hadn't come, so was it only the female members? That giant golem was absent as well. That made sense. He was way too big to fit in the house!

Still trapped in Kuroka's embrace, I noticed that Ophis was staring straight at me. “I want...to talk,” she breathed.

“Let's have tea,” Azazel urged. “I had to trick and lie to the other leaders to make this happen. If we're found out, and things go south, my head will be kissing my shoulders goodbye.”

Got it. All right, all right. Let's do this. If tea's where we're starting, then let's get moving. Gramps, can you hear me up in Heaven? I'm getting caught up in all kinds of crazy problems down here.

I'm sharing a cup of tea with the most powerful being there is...

The VIP room was host to the strangest assembly I'd ever seen.

It was the Gremory Familia (Kiba and Gasper had rushed over, but Koneko was still resting in her room), Irina, Ravel, Azazel, plus Le Fay, Fenrir, and Kuroka from Team Vali, and finally, Ophis, the center of this whole mess. Under normal circumstances, this kind of gathering would've been impossible.

“Here’s your tea,” Akeno said, cautiously offering our enemies their cups.

Le Fay sipped from hers, while Kuroka munched on the sweets that had come alongside it. Fenrir was sound asleep by Le Fay’s side... None of them seemed nervous...

Now that he had joined us, Kiba was on standby behind the rest of us. He looked calm, as usual, but I detected a sharpness from him. He was probably ready to jump into action at a moment’s notice.

Gaspy, worried about his friend, had gone to see Koneko. Hopefully, she’d be able to calm down with him by her side.

I leaned toward Azazel and whispered, “So...what exactly should we do?”

It was an obvious question. He’d asked us to hear Ophis out, but we had no idea how to broach the topic, or what it was.

The other members of the Familia all looked around skeptically from their seats.

There was a genuine chance this could turn into a hyperdimensional battle at the slightest sign of trouble! If that happened, the house and the entire neighborhood would be blown to bits... We’d be annihilated!

“She’s taken an interest in you,” Azazel replied with a hint of worry. “For now, just answer her questions. This is a good chance to learn what makes her tick.”

“That’s easy for you to say! Sh-she’s a terrorist leader and the strongest dragon in the whole world, right...? Stronger than you are! You told me so.”

Having Azazel with us was little comfort. If things went south, he’d die like the rest of us!

“I doubt she’ll go on a rampage. Ophis isn’t belligerent like Vali and Cao Cao. She likely won’t attack anyone other than the Great Red, if she can help it. She just wants to speak with you all, representatives of the three great powers. So listen, okay? It’s only a nice little tea party, got it?”

The words were poor consolation... I couldn’t help but scratch my cheek anxiously. I had two exams coming up! Why was I wasting my time with this?! There was too much going on all at once!

Perhaps it was the power of the Red Dragon Emperor drawing so many important figures around me...? That had to be it. Well, whatever the reason, Ophis was clearly interested in me.

Had my powers finally pulled in the greatest of all beings? Man, they were starting to reach a serious level...

As I breathed a sigh, I caught sight of Ophis, still watching me silently.

“...”

My mouth twitched, and I forced a smile. “S-s-so, what do you want with me...?”

Keep on smiling, keep on smiling, I told myself. *Don't be afraid*. A single wrong word could spell disaster for every faction. I didn't want my name engraved in the history of the underworld for screwing this up! *“The Breast Dragon triggered the collapse of the human world.”* I would break down in tears if something like that ended up printed in underworld textbooks!

Ophis drank from her cup and placed it back on the table. “Is Ddraig finished with being a Heavenly Dragon?”

H-huh...? Now *that* was a curveball.

Doing my best to maintain my forced grin, I replied, “Er, I don't really know what you mean...”

“Human vessel, you have grown since I last saw you. It is most strange, and very different from past Heavenly Dragons. Vali, too. Mysterious. Most mysterious.”

Was she talking about Vali's growth? And mine...? And she thought it was odd...?

“You fought Cao Cao, then Bael,” Ophis continued. “Ddraig has evolved differently. His armor turned crimson. A new development. To the best of my knowledge, a new development. And so I ask: Ddraig, what will you become?”

Whoa, Ophis was incredibly cute when she cocked her head to one side!

How was I supposed to answer, though? Should I tell her that I'd been training like crazy, that I'd achieved several power-ups thanks to an

unquenchable desire for breasts?

I doubted that either was the answer Ophis wanted.

At that moment, my gauntlet materialized around my left arm.

Ddraig?

"I don't know, Ophis," he said out loud. "I don't have the faintest clue what this guy wants to be... But he is trying to grow in an interesting way."

Whoa, nice! Ddraig speaking for himself made this a lot easier! I was happy to let these two legendary dragons talk. And if worst came to worst, I would support him in a fight!

"The Two Heavenly Dragons, my infinite, the Great Red's illusion, the power of hegemony mixed in a chant. Ddraig, why did you seek to become the Red Dragon Dynast?"

"It was probably the result of seeking greater power. In the end, I was destroyed. I never realized that I could increase my strength in other ways. I would never have expected my red to turn crimson."

"I do not know *hegemony*. Those of the Khaos Brigade seek it. I do not know it. The Great Red is not it. Nor am I."

"Someone who's ever been mighty wouldn't understand hegemony. It's a dimension apart from you, born from the nothingness of the infinite, and the Great Red, hailing from illusion. Ophis, what did you gain coming to this world from the dimensional rift? Why do you want to return to the void?"

"I have a question for you. Ddraig. Why do you seek to become something else? Will you abandon hegemony? What else lies ahead?"

Answering Ddraig's question with one of her own. As far as I was concerned, this conversation was pure gibberish. I didn't understand a word of it! Dragons weren't straightforward when they spoke. Albion, Midgardsormr, Vritra, Yulong—they all had super-long lives and spoke at their own paces.

The former Dragon King Tannin was more humanlike in his speech patterns, as was Ddraig when he was his usual self, so they were both easier to understand... But seeing Ddraig converse with Ophis like this only reinforced

how we were from entirely different worlds. Undoubtedly, he had a whole other worldview.

“...Interesting. You don’t see a conversation between a Heavenly Dragon and a Dragon God every day,” Azazel remarked, his eyes sparkling. He was a big fan of rarities like this.

Evidently, I could entrust this to Ddraig. I probably wouldn’t be able to keep up anyhow.

Unfortunately, Ddraig’s reaction to Ophis’s next question was extraordinarily *undependable*!

“Ddraig. Will you become the Breast Dragon Emperor? Can you surpass the bonds of a Heavenly Dragon by groping breasts? Ddraig, will you lord over breasts?”

Ddraig started hyperventilating!

“Ugh... You too...? Ugh! Hah, hah...! I’m passing out! Counselor! Call my counselor!”

Uh-oh! That last question had inflicted too much mental damage. He was on the verge of a breakdown!

I hastened to retrieve Ddraig’s medicine from my pocket, sprinkling it on the jewel embedded in my gauntlet.

“Calm down, Ddraig! Here, I’ve got your medicine!”

As I applied the tonic, he began to relax.

“Ah... S-sorry... That medicine... It’s really strong, isn’t it...?”

You’re too sensitive, Ddraig... You must be totally exhausted! I’m really sorry!

“I want to see it. Ddraig, human vessel. Show me more.”

Ophis was staring straight at me.

M-me...? As expressionless as Ophis was, her eyes showed some interest in me!

Azazel sighed as he rested a hand on my shoulder. “So, do you think you can let her stay here for a few days? As you can see, Ophis wants to study you. I

don't know why exactly, but there's no harm in letting her look, is there?"

Even so... I didn't exactly feel comfortable that a terrorist leader and last-boss-level enemy wanted to learn about me.

I turned to Rias for help, and yet...

"If Issei is okay with it, I don't mind. We'll all be on maximum vigilance, of course. Should anything happen, I'll do everything in my power to stop her. If that's agreeable, then I accept, Azazel."

—! *Rias is okay with this...?! She probably hoped to deduce Ophis's true motives and, if possible, discover a way to stop the Khaos Brigade. Admittedly, I would be happy if all this trouble was resolved peacefully.*

Cao Cao didn't seem like the kind of guy to give up so easily, though.

He was still fanning the flames of Sacred Gear possessors the world over, hoping to throw them into situations where they would unlock their Balance Breakers. The three great powers were working to keep incidents contained as they popped up, but...

Ophis's actions would undoubtedly rock the world, whatever she decided. Maybe I could steer her in the right direction?

Why did all these important matters end up falling on me?! I just wanted to live in peace and harmony with everyone else! Why did craziness always land on my doorstep?! Why did these things have to keep happening?!

All I wanted was to live in peace, damn it! Arrrggghhh!

No matter how much I lamented this predicament, there was really only one path forward. I had to accept.

"All right. But I've got two exams soon, so please don't interrupt me."

Such were my minimum requirements.

Azazel placed a hand on my head. "Sorry for always heaping the trouble on you, Issei. I know full well this is an important time for you, and I'm only making it worse... But this is a vital chance. If we play our cards right, we might be able to help every faction."

Seeing Azazel bowing so deeply made it impossible to refuse. I owed him plenty, after all.

“I’m in no position to be lecturing anyone here, but these guys have an important test coming up. Ophis, Kuroka, please try not to interfere,” Azazel entreated.

“I understand.”

“I’m just here to relax, *meow!*”

Both Ophis and Kuroka agreed... But did they really understand?

As I looked on doubtfully, Le Fay approached, holding something in her hands—a sheet of paper. She was fidgeting. “U-um! I saw your match against Sairaorg Bael! I was so moved! If you don’t mind, can I have your autograph?!”

Right, she was a fan before. Ha-ha-ha.

Vali’s allies were all insanely strong, lacked all sense of apprehension, and were all complete weirdos.

“Sure thing,” I answered with an awkward smile.

And so we welcomed a few unexpected visitors who’d be staying with us for the next few days.



“...”

It was the weekend, and we were all busy studying. Meanwhile, a girl in gothic Lolita clothing—Ophis, obviously—was sitting in the corner watching.

A few days had passed since that meeting, and I was studying for the midterm and the middle-class demon exam with the other Familia members in the spacious living room. Textbooks were spread out all around us, and past them, Ophis observed in silence.

Every now and then, she nibbled at the sweets that my mother had given her. This crazy sight was a huge burden on my mental health... Tests were stressful enough; I didn’t need this!

Everyone was busying themselves, trying not to think about her, but they couldn’t help glancing her way occasionally. The enemy bigwig was idling in the

corner of our living room. This was no time to be hitting the books.

Still, for as creepy as it was, I sensed no hostility from Ophis. She honestly was just sitting there.

Kuroka, Le Fay, and Fenrir were all playing in the indoor pool in the basement. I instructed them not to leave the house. They quickly agreed, but I doubted that Kuroka would stick to her word. She would definitely sneak out whenever she pleased. And if she were discovered, it would cause a huge commotion... Talk about terrifying!

I had to concentrate on my studies, but it was so difficult, even knowing the exam was soon! Sirzechs had gone out of his way to recommend me, so I couldn't let him down!

I knew the names of the Seventy-Two Pillars by heart. I also memorized the rules for demons living in the human world and the standard protection response for survivors of vanquished demon lineages into my head.

I knew the different ways to look after a familiar depending on whether they were a monster or a *youkai*. I could speak on the political differences between the old Demon King regime and the current leadership. I'd even memorized the legendary monsters, dragons, and various gods from each of the mythological factions. I stuffed it all into my brain.

What gave me pause was answering problems about practical issues, underworld economics, and regional folklore. Ugh... Kiba and Akeno could answer all of Rias's questions with ease, but I still struggled and screwed up.

Koneko must have been feeling better today, because she'd decided to study with us for the midterm.

"Are you all right, Koneko?" Gasper asked.

She smiled in reply. "I'm fine, Gaspy."

Koneko's face was still somewhat red, which probably meant that her body was still being affected. She hadn't approached me after that last incident. In fact, we avoided each other as much as possible. She seemed to be fighting hard to resist her instincts, with her body wanting me and her mind saying no. It was a delicate balancing act.

Honestly, I was sad we couldn't talk like we usually did. At times, I felt like speaking up, saying something to lighten her mood. However, it was safest not to have any direct contact.

Fortunately, Koneko and Gasper had excellent grades, so I didn't think her condition would affect her performance, even if it cut into her study time. No, I was more worried for myself on that front!

Ravel used all kinds of books and resources to instruct me, but it was still rough going.

"You should be able to solve problems involving mythological beings you've actually met. Those questions won't be too hard. However, underworld economics and folklore studies are usually a hurdle for reincarnated humans. Demon values can be pretty unusual from the human standpoint, so it's natural to find it all a little hard to grasp. The bedrock cultural assumptions are distinct. Even if you don't yet have a clear handle on demon sensibilities, I think the best course of action would be to respond with what you think a demon would be likely to do."

"I see. Hold on, each noble family has its own distinct personality, though, and the ways they govern their territories are different, too... The Gremorys are deeply affectionate and rule without upsetting their subjects. But that's not true of other families, right? I mean, the demon world is basically an aristocratic society, isn't it...?"

Cultural particularities gave rise to variations in values and outlooks. Would that kind of topic come up in the exam? I understood why former humans, newcomers to the underworld, had to know the local culture to climb the ranks.

People often said that the underworld was changing because of human influence. However, the core principles were still very much static. Understanding all the nuances might pose a problem. The path to becoming a high-class demon was an uphill one; that was for sure... The high-class promotion exam would definitely be an even greater challenge.

Asia suddenly rose to her feet and approached Ophis. "U-um, it can't be good just eating sweets. Here, have some tea."

She was offering Ophis something to drink! Wh-what a show of courage!

Ophis silently took the cup and raised it to her lips.

Asia grinned at that and returned to our group.

“Y-you’re so brave, Asia...,” I whispered.

“I—I don’t think she’s all that scary... Irina invited her to play cards last night...”

“What?!”

Astonished, I shot a glance at Irina, who, with a confident smile, made a bold peace sign.

“Yep. I did. I got to play cards with the strongest dragon there is!”

W-wow...! Talk about reckless! C-come to think of it, she’d also stopped to chat with Arthur from Team Vali during our fight against Loki!

I kind of envied her ability to chat innocently with just about anyone.

Maybe that was why Michael chose Irina as his Ace? With her personality, she could get along with just about any opponent, making her the perfect representative for Heaven.

“So she *has* changed... She certainly gives off an altogether different impression than the Ouroboros of legend, doesn’t she?” Kiba said.

Akeno nodded in agreement. “She’s far from what you might expect from a dragon of chaos, infinity, and emptiness.”

This was a Dragon God, the Infinite... Ophis didn’t exactly look the part. To be honest, the Great Red seemed a lot more godlike.

As Kiba had suggested, perhaps Ophis was evolving in her own way because of her time in this world.

I was beginning to see why Azazel was so intent on letting her stay with us. This dragon, Ophis, was an endless question.

And she had taken an acute interest in *me*... In fact, she regularly sneaked glimpses at me.

What on earth did she want?

Our study session continued while the Infinite Dragon observed.

The night before the middle-class promotion exam, I made sure to end my preparations early to get a good amount of rest. If only my body had got the memo. I had to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night, and it was on my return from the toilet that I noticed an unusual aura emanating from upstairs.

Suspicious, I went to the next floor...

...and found one of the doors slightly ajar... Koneko's room.

Light spilled out into the hallway.

"—."

"—!"

I could hear voices inside. I did my best to remain silent as I approached.

Could it be...? If my hunch is right, it's...

As expected, I recognized the voice.

"Hee-hee-hee! I knew you'd entered your fertile cycle, Shirone. You're *dying* to get his genes, aren't you? *Meow!*"

"...This has nothing to do with you, sister. Please leave."

"Come on. Admit I'm right, and I'll teach you how to snag him, *meow!*"

Yep, it was Kuroka. She'd sneaked into Koneko's room and was trying to put ideas into her head. Dammit, I told her not to cause any problems! Koneko didn't need this, especially when she was going through this sensitive phase!

This would be trouble if the older sister provoked the younger. Plus, well, Kuroka was already incredibly erotic! I wondered if I should tell her to back off, but that would mean barging into Koneko's room without warning...

What was I supposed to do? Before I could come to a conclusion...

"Heh-heh! Is that a lecherous dragon peeping in just outside the door, *meow?*"

She must have noticed me! Uh-oh! I have to fess up and show myself!

The door was already slightly open, but I knocked on it anyway before

entering.

Koneko and Kuroka were both in their nightwear, facing each other atop the bed. Koneko's cat ears and tail were poking out, the latter swinging freely behind her. I could tell at once that she was excited. Her eyes were unusually sharp, and her face was flushed. It was as clear as day that she was on the verge of another breakdown.

"Kuroka, what have you been telling Koneko?"

"Don't be so judgmental, *meow*. I knew Shirone was in heat the moment I saw her, so I came to see how she's doing. It's natural for a big sister to worry," Kuroka said with a cute wink.

Koneko's stern expression didn't seem to validate that claim. If I had to guess, Kuroka had come more out of curiosity than concern.

"She's in a very delicate state, *meow*. For example..." Without warning, Kuroka took Koneko's arm and thrust her sister in my direction.

Koneko was sent flying toward my chest! I managed to catch her, and yet...

"...!"

She clung to me with a sad look on her face. Her eyes glistened. "*Meow... Issei...*" A sweet and sensual voice drifted from her lips like a whisper. Her tail coiled around my right arm.

"No matter how much a *nekomata* tries to hold back, once she touches the skin of the man she loves, she'll want to make babies... Shirone is desperate to bear your children, Red Dragon Emperor. *Meow!*"

I—I didn't know what to say! I couldn't make a move on her now! Any reckless decision here would mean endangering her later!

Still, Koneko was writhing in my arms and rubbing up against me. She was even trying to remove my clothes as lust burned in her eyes. It was like a dam bursting! Sh-she even started taking off her nightwear! I could see her cute little breasts peeking out through gaps in her pajamas! The situation was getting dangerous!

No, no, no, no, no! You can't, Koneko! If we go ahead with this, if you end up

carrying a child, it will put you and the kid in danger!

“...Issei... Is my body...no good...? Won't you have sex with me...? I...I can take you in... I know I'm small in a lot of ways, but I'm still a woman... I want your babies, Issei...”

Don't talk like that, pleeeaaase! If you keep pushing up against me and whispering in my ear, I'll lose all sense of reason!

I'd made a promise to Rias! I *couldn't* sleep with Koneko! Rias had even offered a reward! I had to be strong for Koneko! I had to hold back! Arrrggghhh!

But her body was so deliciously, delectably soft!

I tried to retreat, but my legs caught on something, and I fell flat on my behind!

The collapse placed Koneko's face directly in front of mine. Then she all but dropped on me in an embrace. This was getting out of hand!

“I won't lose to that chicken girl... I won't let her take you from me... Even if I can't be your manager, if I can satisfy you...”

Koneko had been acting cool about it, but I guess she was upset over Ravel. Maybe it was because the two of them were in the same grade? In any event, this wasn't a good way to help me! Koneko had her own redeeming qualities that made her special!

Kuroka, meanwhile, watched with an amused grin!

You damn nekomata! You're enjoying this, aren't you?!

I thought she was just going to observe from a distance, yet she approached us. She casually tugged at the belt of her kimono and stripped right there!

Her breasts burst out with an audible *plump*! They were immense—as huge as Rias's or Akeno's!

“Heh-heh-heh! How lovely it would be to claim the Red Dragon Emperor's chastity in front of Shirone.”

The way she licked her lips was so erotic that I found myself swallowing hard.

Kuroka pulled Koneko away from me and sat down in her place! Her huge

chest pressed up against me!

Whoaaaaa! What a wonderful sensation! So soft and rich! It rivaled Akeno's impeccable softness in some respects, yet there was a firmness and elasticity like Rias's!

I was deeply moved by those perfectly balanced, wonderfully proportioned breasts! Kuroka's thighs were well shaped and irresistible, too! No wonder so many people had been seduced by *nekomata* in the past! They were too damn sexy!

Straddling me, Kuroka peered down as she cooed, "You haven't still done this before, right?"

—! She can tell?! Is it that obvious?!

"I thought you'd be doing it with the Switch Princess every night by now. Guess I was wrong, *meow*. Well, I guess there's no helping it now... All right. I'll be your first woman, *meow*. It's okay. We can start with the basics..."

My brain was boiling, and my head threatened to explode!

Kuroka, heedless of my stunned mental state, started licking me all the way from my stomach up to my neck! Her tongue was soft and warm, and I felt myself losing my mind!

"So this is the taste of the Red Dragon Emperor," she said, lapping up the string of saliva dangling from her mouth. "I'll make sure to remember it. I never expected to sample yours before Vali's."

She's committing it to memory?! I didn't know what that meant, but it was certainly erotic! This *nekomata* lady was far too sensual! I had to wonder if Vali preferred guys, since he'd refused giving his genes to this incredible woman. How could he only be interested in fighting?!

"Shirone." Kuroka beckoned to her sister. "Let me teach you a *nekomata* mating ritual. Here. Taste him. Learn his flavor."

Koneko looked like she was losing her sense of reason; her eyes swam. She was listening to Kuroka! Her cute little tongue began to glide up my neck!

Hold on... Mating ritual?!

A wave of indescribable pleasure ran over me! This was it! This was *it*! It was obscene, but I couldn't get enough!

An entranced Koneko ran her tongue across my body.

Give me a break! It felt so good that my sense of logical reason was on the verge of collapse!

Koneko showed no sign of stopping, so Kuroka poked her in the neck with her finger, causing her to jump. Koneko's strength left her, and she collapsed onto me... Did Kuroka use some kind of technique to stop her? Koneko seemed to be conscious, and yet...

"You should stop here for now, Shirone. Okay? You've gone into heat early only because of the influence of those other women. If you get pregnant now, you and your child might die. If you really want this man's kids, you should wait until you can control your fertile period, like I can. *Meow...* Hey, Red Dragon Emperor, surely you realize I'm a better deal, right?"

So as she grew more mature, Koneko would be able to control her fertile period just like her sister. It was definitely best for Koneko to wait to get pregnant then.

However, when she heard Kuroka say all this, Koneko's lost strength inexplicably returned.

"...No!" she cried, lifting her trembling body and clinging to me as though to protect me from her sister. "Issei is mine. I'll never let you have him, sister!"

Koneko... I was deeply moved! She cared so strongly for me... I was over the moon! Still, it would've been nice to have Kuroka, too... No, no! I had to take Koneko's side!

Kuroka watched on, dumbfounded, but her lips eventually curled into a little grin.

"Hey, you, the black cat over there."

—! *A new voice!* I looked around and spotted Ravel standing in the doorway!

"Oh my, if it isn't the young lady from the Phenex family. *Meow.*"

Ravel started walking toward us. "You're Koneko's older sister, aren't you?"

Koneko isn't in very good shape right now. As her classmate, I can't let you do anything to her! Please keep her away from Issei!"

Whoa! Ravel's getting into an argument with Kuroka! She really does like Koneko! And thanks for looking out for me, too!

Kuroka looked surprised for a moment, although she swiftly recovered. "You're Shirone's friend, *meow*? Hmm. Lots of concerned parties keep showing up, don't they?" She reached out to touch Ravel's ringlet curls. "Looks like I've made Shirone's friend angry, *meow*." Kuroka stuck out her tongue. After standing and fixing her kimono, she headed for the door. "Shirone is just a little unstable now," she whispered in my ear as she walked past. "Don't let her push herself too hard."

—.

Hers was a gentle voice.

"She's a precious *nekoshou*. If you don't take good care of her, it will be a disaster for our tribe," Kuroka said as she passed Ravel. Then she waved a hand and made her exit.

Does she...actually care for her sister?

"Koneko, are you all right?" Ravel asked, clearly worried.

"What are you doing here, Ravel?" I asked.

"W-well, I *am* Koneko's classmate, so I've been checking in on her every night!" Ravel answered with flushed cheeks. "She's been helping me acclimate to Japan, and if she doesn't recover soon, I won't know what to do! That's all!"

I guess Ravel was concerned in her own way. And she was visiting every night? She really did have a kind heart.

"I'm sorry. Because of me, Issei, you...," Koneko began to apologize.

—. *Huh?* It could've been my imagination, but it looked like the flush had left her cheeks. Her face appeared normal again...

"Excuse me," I said, pressing a hand against her forehead. I held it there for ten whole seconds, yet Koneko didn't show the slightest reaction. "Hey, Koneko, how do you feel?"

Perhaps she also recognized the shift in her body because she touched her forehead and stomach.

“...I’m back to normal,” she stated.

It was just as I thought! Her fertile period had ended! That was why she didn’t react when I touched her! At last, things were back to normal!

“What happened?” Ravel wondered.

I knew the answer—Kuroka.

She’d done something when she poked Koneko on the neck. Koneko had jumped back, and I thought that’s all it was. However, that technique must have done something to stop Koneko’s heat.

Kuroka... There was no guessing at that woman’s intentions. Did she actually care about her sister, or was this all a game for her?

Regardless, Koneko was feeling better, and that was a win in my book.

I was a little disappointed, though. I-it wasn’t every day that I got see Koneko acting so erotic... That memory had to be filed away for safekeeping!

I sighed with relief. One of the issues ahead of the exams had been resolved without much effort.



On the day of the exam, we gathered by the magic teleportation array in the basement of the Hyoudou residence.

We were all wearing our Kuou Academy uniforms, which had essentially become Gremory Familia uniforms at this point. We were also carrying our schoolbags, each containing important test items.

The atmosphere reminded me of my high school entrance test.

I was to make my way to the promotion exam center with Kiba, Akeno, and my manager, Ravel. Rias, Azazel, and the other club members would accompany us to the underworld, but they’d have to wait at a hotel close to the venue.

The teleportation circle would take Kiba, Akeno, and me to the exam center. After that, the others would jump directly to the hotel.

I'd assumed that we'd head to the Gremory territory first, and then travel to the test site by car or something, but that wasn't the case.

And if you're wondering why... Well, we were practically celebrities. But more importantly, my relationship with Rias was garnering a lot of attention, and apparently, it was better to avoid being seen in public.

This was all because I'd confessed my love to her during the last match. Since then, the media had flooded the underworld with stories like *True Love Blossoms Between Master and Servant!* I'd been warned that if we ventured out in public, even for a moment, we'd be ambushed by reporters.

Rias was the heir to the House of Gremory and the younger sister of a Demon King. And I, the Breast Dragon, was her boyfriend. We were both hot topics already, and now that we were growing closer, there was sure to be tons of buzz about us.

"Rias is a pure-blooded demon, a princess, and Sirzechs's sister," Azazel had explained. "You're her servant, the Red Dragon Emperor and the Breast Dragon. And you're both of different social statuses. Everyone's gonna want to know what you two are doing. You two are all the rage, even with underworld women from normal backgrounds."

I guess that meant it was pretty wild. A romance that surpassed social boundaries. Thankfully, the underworld viewed it favorably.

"It's getting really serious," Ravel had added. "Journalists have even been asking my brother for an interview."

Right, Riser was Rias's ex-fiancé. Considering how their relationship had ended, I could see why the media might hound him. Initially, my interrupting the wedding caused a stir only among the aristocracy. Reporters had largely ignored it.

The situation was different now. I was now the Breast Emperor, a popular figure in the underworld.

Knowing all of that, jumping directly to the test venue felt best. People knew we were taking the exam, and there'd be paparazzi lurking all around.

I didn't know what to make of all this. Was I supposed to be happy? Why

couldn't everyone just watch on quietly? I'd confessed only a few days ago! Honestly, I still wasn't certain how to advance our relationship!

We hadn't even managed to go on a date after opening up to each other. I wanted to invite her on one, but with the tests, Koneko's health, and Ophis's visit, I never got the opportunity.

Glancing around, I noticed Gasper was missing.

"Gasper's not going to see us off?" I asked.

"Oh, he's already made the jump—to the Grigori's research facility," Azazel explained.

"—. By himself?"

I was taken aback.

Azazel nodded. "He came crying to me after the match against Sairaorg. 'I want to be strong like Issei and the others! You're always protecting me...! But I'm a man of the Gremory Familia; I can't keep acting so pathetic...!'"

I had no idea he'd gone to Azazel for help.

"The kid's a shut-in and a coward at heart, but he worked up the courage to knock on the Grigori's gate all by himself. Right now, he's probably learning about his Sacred Gear with help from our researchers."

Gasper really did want to get stronger, and not just via regular training. He was even boning up on his unique abilities. It must have meant a lot to him if he turned to the fallen angels for assistance.

Damn, he's a fine man of the Gremory Familia. Master your abilities and come home to us, Gasper! Okay, so that explains what our shut-in vampire's up to... But what about those guys? I looked over at Ophis and our three guests from Team Vali.

"What about Ophis and Kuroka and the others?" I said to Azazel.

"They'll be coming to the hotel with us. Things could get messy if they visit the test site."

Would they be all right at the hotel?

“Once your exam is over, I’m planning on taking Ophis to meet Sirzechs. This is a good opportunity. She said she’ll go if you do. So I’ll need you guys to head to Sirzechs’s place after the test.”

Evidently, Azazel had it all planned out.

“I understand. I don’t know what I can do, but I guess there’s a good reason for Ophis to meet Sirzechs, right?”

“Yeah. If possible, I’d like to get everyone moving in a better direction together. We all thought negotiation was impossible, but now there’s a chance. It’s a huge step. If things go smoothly, the enemy organization might disperse, leaving only a few stragglers to pick off one by one. And if they don’t have Ophis’s serpents to empower them, it’ll be that much easier. I’m tempted to thank Vali for offering us this chance.”

Vali, huh? It was his idea to trust Azazel with Ophis?

“He wouldn’t send Ophis to us for no reason, though,” I whispered.

Azazel narrowed his eyes. “Maybe he wants to hide her...from a threat.”

A threat? Is someone targeting Ophis?

She was a terrorist leader. Every faction likely hoped her organization would collapse with her gone. However, she was too powerful, so most people wouldn’t dare try anything directly.

If Vali’s really trying to hide her, then what’s he keeping her from? Azazel seemed to have some idea, but I just couldn’t wrap my head around it.

Well, there was no use worrying about that for the moment. I had to focus on the middle-class promotion exam! After all that trouble studying, I had to come back with a good score. Anything less, and I’d be too ashamed to look the others in the eye!

And once all this was over, I still had the midterm... My troubles were just beginning.

Right before Kiba, Akeno, Ravel, and I made the jump...

“Wait,” Rias called to stop us. She walked straight up to me and kissed me on the cheek. “A good luck charm. I’m confident you’ll pass, Issei.”

I couldn't have asked for anything better!

Okay! I can do this! I'm going to ask her!

"I'm definitely going to pass! A-and when I do, please go out on a date with me!"

There, I said it! Clearly and loudly! I asked her out on a date!

Rias was taken aback for a moment, but she beamed. "Yes, let's... It's a promise. I'll be waiting for you."

All riiiiiiiiight! I have a date! A date with Rias! Awesome! All that's left is to pass my exam! I'm gonna give it my all! I have to now that there's a date hinging on my success!

"Geez. Getting all cutesy in front of us... Must be nice to be young!" Azazel commented with a flat sigh.

Don't say it like that, Teach! It took a lot of courage to work through my embarrassment and ask her!

"Okay, let's get going!"

The four of us bade farewell to Rias and the others and vanished into the teleportation circle's light!

Wait for me, Rias! I love you!



...When the light subsided, we were standing in a spacious area. Another magic teleportation array glowed faintly beneath our feet. Was this the exam center?

"Welcome. Thank you all for coming. You belong to the Familia of Rias Gremory, I presume? I was informed of your arrival ahead of time. Please, could you all show me documentation to verify your identities?"

The staffer, dressed in formal attire, asked us each to confirm who we were.

If I remembered correctly, I was supposed to show a seal with the Gremory Familia's insignia and a letter of recommendation. The seal was made from the bones of a certain monster, ground up into a circular shape, and marked on a crimson sheet.

“Please, after me,” the staff member beckoned after confirming our papers.

We proceeded through a stone corridor that wasn’t luxurious in design but still had a careful construction to its simplicity.

“The middle-class promotion test center is in the House of Glasya-Labolas’s territory,” Kiba explained softly while we walked.

Huh, so we’re in the Glasya-Labolas part of the underworld? I’d been so busy studying that I hadn’t stopped to ask where exactly the exam was held.

That meant this land belonged to the Demon King Asmodeus, the one whose motto was “You work, you lose.” It was also the home of that punk who’d gotten himself beaten to a pulp by Sairaorg.

“The structure was built here in honor of the expert strategist Falbium Asmodeus,” Akeno added.

Try as I might, I could only picture that unmotivated Demon King. It was hard to associate him with an exam venue.

“I would have thought Ajuka Beelzebub, with all his knowledge, would make more sense,” I said. “I’m surprised the test center isn’t in his territory.”

“There is one there,” Kiba replied. “There are exam buildings throughout the underworld, and the one with the highest authority is indeed in the House of Astaroth’s domain. There are several prestigious academies there as well. The president, apparently, wavered between attending one of those and another in Sirzechs’s territory.”

Ah. So that’s it. Then why are we at the Glasya-Labolas center?

“However, the House of Astaroth lost a lot of its authority after that incident...,” Kiba added quietly to keep the staffer from overhearing.

...Evidently, there were some repercussions after that whole thing with Diodora Astaroth. I heard that the House of Astaroth was in dire straits because of him. It was only thanks to the influence of Ajuka, the foremost authority on the demon technical program, that things weren’t worse. Still, it was pretty obvious that the underworld’s other noble families would be watching the House of Astaroth more closely going forward. It had already lost the right to

nominate a candidate for a future Demon King.

The exam staffer led us to a reception area. A few windows provided a view to the outside, and other test participants were talking to secretaries.

There were fewer demons than I'd expected. The large room almost seemed deserted.

"Please complete the application documents at the desk to receive your admission tickets," the staffer explained. "Once you're ready, you can proceed straight into the examination hall on the upper floor for the written portion of the test. The written exam will be conducted first, the practical component second."

Writing first, eh? I'd studied a lot for it, but I still wanted to get as many points as possible on the practical side, just in case.

"Before the exam begins, you will need to submit your reports to a proctor. Please make sure you have them ready."

Oh, right, my essay. I wrote my essay on the theme Grayfia had suggested, but I still wasn't used to writing in the demon script. I'd kept a dictionary open next to my paper the entire time I worked on it.

"Other than that, please wait patiently until you're instructed to go to the testing room. Good luck." With those words, the staffer left us.

"I'll retrieve the documents you need to fill out," Ravel said, scurrying off.

Wow. She really is thoughtful.

"...There aren't a lot of people here," I remarked.

It was Kiba who answered. "Not a lot of demons get the chance to take promotion exams in the underworld these days. I think there are even fewer taking the high-class ones."

There were few big battles anymore, which meant that most demons won promotions by forging pacts with standout clients or performing exceptionally well in Rating Games. The former was more challenging, so most eligible candidates earned their way via the second option. We were something of an exception, I guess.

“Issei. There’s something I want to tell you before the test.” Kiba had a serious look on his face.

“What’s up?”

“I’m glad I met you.”

—.

What on earth was he saying?

“...You’ve been saying some odd stuff recently, you know that?” I said uncomfortably.

He broke out into a half grin. “Ha-ha-ha. I don’t think I would’ve had a chance at promotion if not for you.”

“Really? You’re plenty strong enough by yourself. You would have made it sooner or later.”

“No. I’m standing here today because I’ve seen how you live your life—how you fight. You showed me what I lacked. If not for that, I never would have come this far.”

Was that true? I’d learned a lot from Kiba as well. He’d helped me find my goals and given me the strength to do my best.

Shrugging, I responded, “I don’t really get it. The mind of a pretty boy makes no sense to me... But let’s pass this exam, both of us. We’re men of the Gremory Familia, right?”

“Of course. We’ve come this far, so let’s aim to become high-class demons. I have a goal now—to become the greatest of Knights. I want to stand side by side with you,” Kiba stated, holding out his hand. It took it in mine, and we shook.

“Sounds good. *That’s* easy to understand. I don’t know how many thousand years I’ll be here, but let’s make sure the whole underworld knows our names.”

Akeno placed her hand on top of ours.

“Oh-ho-ho, what a passionate friendship. We’ll all pass, I’m sure.”

““Right!”” Kiba and I exclaimed in unison.

Yeah! The three of us were all going to get promoted today!

“I’ve brought your paperwork, everyone! We can fill the forms out over here!”

We filled out the necessary documentation under Ravel’s guidance, and the exam got underway!

“Please do your best! I’ll be waiting for you here.”

After saying goodbye to Ravel at the base of the stairs leading to the second floor, Kiba, Akeno, and I made our way upward.

I spotted a sign written in the demon script up ahead: MIDDLE-CLASS DEMON PROMOTION EXAM: WRITTEN EXAM VENUE. We entered a room fitted with several long desks—almost like a college classroom. That said, I’d only seen inside a college classroom during a brief visit to the university on Kuou Academy’s premises.

My admission ticket was printed with the number 12, indicating a seat. Kiba’s number was 11, and Akeno’s 10.

The three of us sat next to each other, and whispers from all around swiftly buffeted us.

“Are they from the Gremory Familia? The Holy Demon Sword guy, the Red Dragon Emperor, and the Vestal of Holy Lightning...?”

“It’s the Breast Dragon! The guy who defeated Sairaorg Bael! The Red Dragon Emperor!”

“So the rumors were true. The Demon Kings did recommend them for promotion...”

“That must be why there are so many people with cameras outside...”

Talk about embarrassing. Everyone knew all about us. I guess that TV show and the news reports had made me pretty famous. And that last match had only added to it. Judging from what others were saying, the media knew we were at this test center.

In the human world, those kinds of obsessive journalists were called paparazzi. It was scary stuff.

I'd gone in expecting all this, though, so I was ready. All that mattered was doing my best on this exam so I didn't make a fool of myself. I had to put on a serious face and maintain a responsible attitude.

"You don't need to try so hard. I think you can just act how you usually do," Kiba said.

But I'm carrying the Gremory name on my back!

We waited for the test to begin while other applicants filtered into the hall. The room could have easily accommodated a hundred people, but the actual number here didn't come close to that.

Most of the demons were former humans, but there were also beastmen, *youkai*, and monster-type demons. Humans weren't the only reborn beings after all. All manner of demons were eligible for promotion.

Glancing around, I realized that there couldn't have been more than forty people in all. Not many. I'd heard that promotion was rare, but this was even fewer than I'd anticipated!

I felt like I finally understood Sairaorg's ambition. It would be nice to give more opportunities to those with talent. However, that wouldn't be easy with the current climate in the underworld. Azazel had also commented on how the political sphere was divided between the Demon Kings' side and the great prince's.

A proctor entered the room and collected our reports. With those submitted, it was time to face the written test.

I pulled out my writing utensils and breathed deep as I stared at the facedown sheets of paper that had been handed to me. Kiba and Akeno were both remarkably calm. They were probably confident of their success... Practical fighting ability was one thing, but I had little faith in my book smarts. However, Rias, Ravel, and the others had worked hard to help me! I had to produce results!

"It's time. Please begin," the examiner said, and the promotion exam finally began!

Everyone gathered flipped over their test papers and set to work!

I had to answer as many questions as possible!



“What’s the name of Levia-tan’s coolest enemy leader”? What a cheap question,” I groused weakly, slumped over on the table in the test center’s cafeteria.

The written portion was divided into multiple sections and took me several hours to complete. I was free of the brain-racking gauntlet, yet I still found myself sighing with resignation at the bizarre questions.

I’d managed to handle the basic ones about demon history and culture. However, the sociology segment had way too many questions about the demon girl TV show *Magical Levia-tan* produced by Serafall Leviathan! *Name the enemy leaders*, it said. How was I supposed to know?!

Well, there were also questions on the *Breast Dragon* children’s show, too. And others about recent events in the underworld.

Some were even related to problems caused by the Khaos Brigade. Being one of that group’s victims, I knew more about it than most and had no problem dealing with those questions. I made sure not to jot down any info that wasn’t public, though. Man, I couldn’t tell if this whole exam thing was meant to be taken seriously or not!

“Issei, I’ve brought you another cup of tea,” Ravel said. She was so quick on her feet. What a great manager!

“Thank you, Ravel. With your help, I handled the worst parts of the written test.”

“O-of course! As your manager, it would inconvenience me if you failed!” she spat. Guess she was back to her standoffish mode.

“I was able to answer almost all the questions. I’m even starting to feel a little positive about my chances.”

Don’t get me wrong, the test was difficult, and I had to write all my answers in the demon script.

However, I managed to comprehend every question. None of them went over my head. That studying really paid off.

Maybe the most difficult part of the exam is actually just qualifying for it? That would certainly explain the low number of examinees. Even this cafeteria was way too large for the number of people using it.

Whatever the reason, I'd done a fair job on the first half. Even if my score only met the bare minimum, I could make up the difference in the next section of the test.

"We'll be moving on to the practical section soon," Kiba said while twisting his upper body to loosen his muscles.

"Yep! My specialty!"

"It's going to be held indoors here," Ravel noted while reading the registration documents.

"Oh dear. It's good to be enthusiastic, Issei, but don't push yourself too hard, all right?" Akeno cautioned.

Azazel had said something similar: I didn't need to try too hard on the physical portion.

But this was an exam; I had to give it my all! Besides, this was the part I could actually do well on.

There was only a little time to chat before we had to go.

The three of us said goodbye to Ravel once more, changed into our sports clothes, and headed for the physical segment venue—a huge gymnasium.

Other examinees had also changed into exercise attire and were busy doing warm-ups.

I should loosen up a little, too!

I started by jogging in place, then took a lap around the track.

While Akeno, Kiba, and I were busy stretching, proctors arrived and took roll. We were each instructed to attach a badge with our registration number to our tracksuit jackets.

"The practical examination is very simple," one of the examiners began. "You will fight each other in one-on-one bouts. In a moment, you will draw lots to

determine your opponent.”

Huh. Well, it's easy to follow, at least. I had to fight someone decided at random and beat them. It seemed pretty simple.

“Your fights will be evaluated as a whole. A loss doesn't necessarily mean failure. Of course, the winner will receive a higher score. However, we will assess your performance in depth, inspecting your physical acuity, mental strength, and the techniques you employ. Try to ensure your bout is a good one! The rules are simple. Fight your opponent using your unique strengths. Use of weapons is permitted. If you kill your opponent, you will be disqualified. If your opponent dies because of an accident, we examiners will deliberate on the outcome. Please refer to the reference materials you received regarding the potential for accidental death. Next...”

The explanation went on and on, but basically, all I had to do was show the proctors a good fight!

Hold on, a good match?! I doubled over, gripping my head in my hands. H-how?! All my matches have been nothing but slugfests! I've never fought making clever use of my demon powers or special skills!

“The examination center has issued all Pawns special Promotion approval cards, so they will be permitted to Promote during their fights,” one proctor added.

Oh, I can Promote? I'd never heard of those special cards before. Were they similar to the one that Rias had given Asia back during the school trip?

“Ajuka Beelzebub apparently distributes special cards to places like this,” Kiba explained. “Lord Beelzebub is the only one who can make them, and they're supposed to be otherwise impossible to forge.”

In other words, re-creating them was beyond anyone else. Beelzebub sure had amazing technical knowledge... In a way, he knew more than Azazel.

“It seems that the basic rule is to fight without killing your opponent. Unlike the high-class demon exam, there's no need to use elaborate strategies or tactics, so it should be quite simple,” Akeno said.

There's a strategy component to the high-class demon promotion exam?! I

guess that makes sense. High-class demons received sets of Evil Pieces to create their own Familias, so I understood the merit of testing their cleverness. *Crap! That means I'll have to study tactics after I finish the middle-class test! But I'm way too stupid to learn real strategy!*

Once the proctor had finished explaining, we proceeded to pick lots. I stuck my hand into the box and pulled out a numbered ball... The process was pretty much identical to how these types of things were done in the human world. Considering most candidates here were former humans, maybe they'd settled on this method to keep things running smoothly.

I'd pulled out the number 4. My match would probably be one of the first ones.

Kiba picked a 26, while Akeno got a 32. I guessed that meant we wouldn't be fighting each other. I was wondering what might happen if any of us were pitted against each other, but that wasn't the case. Kiba's and Akeno's fights would be much later than mine.

"Two matches will be conducted simultaneously! First up will be numbers 1 and 2, and numbers 3 and 4!"

Seriously? It's my turn already? Talk about fast! I'm not ready yet!

"I'm up first, huh?" I muttered.

"Do your best," Kiba encouraged.

"You can do it, Issei," Akeno added.

"I—I guess this is it, then."

I stepped nervously onto the circular field demarcated with a ring of demonic power.

All right. How do I play this? I can't use my Triaina combo.

Even if promotions were allowed, it felt unfair to keep changing forms. Once I Promoted, I'd have to stick with it. Knowing that, a Queen was likely the best option. My True Queen form was still unstable and not quite ready to use, though. But did I need to show off my full strength for this fight?

While I thought things over, my opponent—a man of medium build—entered

the field. He didn't really exude much strength, but he'd earned the right to be here in one way or another. I couldn't get careless.

A proctor stepped between us, glancing back and forth. "Are you both ready?" he asked.

My opponent and I nodded.

The proctor raised his hand...and brought it down quickly. "Begin!"

This was it! I immediately summoned my gauntlet and activated my Balance Breaker countdown!

"I'm promoting to a Queen!"

I chose my usual option—a Queen! I couldn't use my True Queen without being disqualified, so a regular one would have to do! And although my Triaina was off limits, I'd still put a lot of effort into my standard training! I was confident!

"Hah!"

My opponent's hand glowed with demonic power as he launched a huge ball of flame my way! It was a pretty impressive magic attack! If he had a Sacred Gear in his arsenal, he would probably bust it out soon! I had to get my Balance Breaker ready first!

"Freezing Archaeopteryx!"

A chill began to waft around the man, and at the same time, ice gathered in the air, forming into a huge bird!

A Sacred Gear capable of forging a massive bird out of ice?

I successfully dodged the giant ice bird's onslaught and the man's magical attacks while waiting for my countdown to hit zero! The period before my Balance Breaker activated was my greatest weakness! But opening the path to my True Queen had shortened the countdown even more!

The timer reached its end while I evaded the oncoming barrage.

All right! Now for the main act!

"Balance Breaker!"

A red aura enveloped my body, coalescing into my armor! Power filled me, and I beat my dragon wings.

I wasn't going to lose! Victory here meant passing the promotion exam!

"Jet!"

Booooooooooom! The booster pack on my back fired to life, and I rocketed forward at my opponent! He didn't have the speed to respond! I could do this!

I hurled my fist forward! The first strike was mine!

Thud! I easily punched through the gigantic ice bird and continued toward my target!

"—!"

Although my opponent conjured a defensive magic array using his demonic powers, he was unable to stop my attack entirely. My blow connected, sending him hurtling to the far side of the hall.

Booooooooooom!

He smashed into the wall...and kept on going.

...

I paused for a moment and looked at my fist.

Huh? That guy went flying way harder than I'd expected. It hadn't been an especially powerful hit. Granted, it wasn't a weak one, either, but...

One of the proctors hurried off to find my opponent, who'd been blown far away.

A few spectating examinees offered their thoughts.

"...Y-you've got to be kidding me! He's so strong!"

"I see. He's far beyond a typical low-ranking demon."

"How unfortunate to be pitted against him. He's a total monster..."

"In terms of power alone, he's already at the upper end of high-class demon territory, right...?"

"So this is the power of the Red Dragon Emperor, who defeated both the evil

god Loki and Sairaorg Bael...”

People whispered to one another all around me, and I wasn’t sure how to react. I fought my best because I didn’t want to fail the exam. I expected my opponent to be on the same level, and that I couldn’t go easy on him...

That proctor who’d left returned through the gaping hole in the wall, carrying my fallen opponent in his arms.

The chief examiner shook his head. Then he turned to the rest of us and announced, “Examinee Number Four, Issei Hyoudou, wins!”

...

Huh? I-is that the end of the practical exam...? It’s over?

I was stunned to have achieved victory so effortlessly.

Following the exam, I asked Ravel to open a communication magic circle so that we could report back to Azazel.

“T-Teach! The practical exam...!”

“Oh? What happened? By the way, we’re having lunch at a private restaurant right now.”

Did that mean he was day drinking again?! Why did *he* get to have fun?!

“About the test! U-um, it wasn’t a problem for the three of us. Actually—”

“You overwhelmed them, right?” he finished with a grin.

My head nodded mechanically in response. “Y-yeah.”

Azazel breathed a sigh. *“Of course. You guys boast exceptional strength for low-class demons. Do you realize you’re already equivalent to the upper end of the demon middle class? In terms of accomplishments, you’re basically high class. That’s especially true of you, Issei. That Triaina and True Queen form are up there with the best of them. Same goes for Sairaorg, though.”*

“I didn’t know that. When did I—we—get so strong?”

Following my bout, Kiba and Akeno had similarly trounced their opponents. I felt sorry that I’d gone overboard and damaged the building itself. Fortunately, Kiba and Akeno held back enough to keep from wrecking anything.

Now I understood why everyone had said I didn't need to take the physical portion too seriously. Evidently, there was a huge gulf between the other examinees and us. If we went all out, it risked causing needless devastation.

Worst case, I might have accidentally killed my opponent... Perhaps I'd been too enthusiastic? I'd been so preoccupied with passing and staying on my toes...

"You've been pitted against Team Vali's powerful members, the evil Norse god Loki and his uber-powerful hound Fenrir, and the True Longinus, the strongest god-destroying Sacred Gear of them all. The fact that you've survived foes like that is pretty telling. Of course, you're abnormally powerful. You, Kiba, Akeno, Xenovia, and Rossweisse are all pretty much high-class demon level. Once Koneko masters her sage arts, she'll be up there with you guys, too."

O-oh...

I guess that winning through all those challenges elevated us beyond middle-class demon level. Our opponents were all unusually powerful, and keeping up with them required serious training, so I guess I understood.

Yet again, I had to acknowledge how strong we'd become. However, for all that might, our foes were still beyond us. Man, knowing that was a huge downer.

"That girl you're head over heels for was pretty lucky to find you," Azazel remarked.

"Yep, Rias is the best woman there is!"

Meeting her was proof that we had something special! And that encounter had led to us finding the others, too!

"Hey, Rias. Issei just called you the best woman there is," Azazel called out in a suggestive voice.

Wh-wh-wh-wh-what?! Is she sitting nearby?!

"H-hold on, Teach! Why are you telling her I said that?!"

"Ha-ha! She turned pink! Ah, the passion of youth! It brings a tear to the eye! And here I am single, dammit!" Azazel was starting to sound frustrated.

Please, Teach, this is mortifying. Don't mess with Rias and me too much! Let

us live in peace!

“You know, I was just telling her that she doesn’t need to undergo intense training to get stronger.”

Rias is...training? Thinking back, I remembered that she’d been upset about not holding her own against Regulus. But her opponent was obscenely strong, an exceptional Longinus capable of acting independently. Plus, a demonic creature presiding over lions.

“Her best weapon is her good fortune,” Azazel continued. “The Gremory Familia’s members are superior to other high-class demon Familias. Heck, even that bastard Riser admitted as much. That’s not something you can learn. And you’ll probably have more exceptional encounters in the future. Personally, I think your surviving so many impossible challenges is pretty incredible. What you kids have done goes beyond the stuff of miracles. It’s insane.”

Beyond miracles? I kind of understood. I agreed that it was amazing we’d managed to work together and weather everything thrown at us.

“The exam’s over, right? Use the teleportation array at the test center to jump to the hotel. I know the results aren’t posted yet, but let’s celebrate.”

Once the call had ended, Akeno, Kiba, and I all let out tired sighs.

“Good work, everyone,” Kiba said with a smile.

“We should be able to rest while we wait for the results,” Akeno replied.

“No, not yet. We can’t get lazy while we’ve still got the midterm,” I noted.

“The Red Dragon Emperor’s immense power won’t be much help there,” Kiba joked.

Both Akeno and Ravel laughed.

I was an idiot imbued with immense power, but I was still an idiot.

Life.3

Heroes in Rebellion

“Good job on the exam. Cheers.” Azazel gulped down the beverage in his hand.

He’d been drinking since midday. How much had this fallen angel governor consumed...?

Kiba, Akeno, Ravel, and I jumped to the hotel, where the others were waiting in a private restaurant. Everyone except for Gasper and Rossweisse was there to welcome us, enjoying the delicious food.

I was starving, so I wasted no time filling myself with all the gorgeously prepared dishes.

“How was it?” Rias asked from her seat beside me.

“Um, well, it was definitely tough in spots, but I think I did okay, thanks to everyone’s help. I went a little overboard during the practical section, though...”

I’d used my Red Dragon Emperor powers to utterly smash my opponent. And I had blasted a hole in the wall.

“I’ll pay for the repair fees, so don’t worry about that. But if you do meet another middle-class demon, you can’t lash out at full strength, okay? You’re incredibly strong.”

A warning from Rias. Yep, I had to reflect on my actions.

I’d never considered my power to be so different from that of other low-class demons. Frankly, I was taken aback.

So on raw ability alone, I’m already high-class demon level? Sure, I felt strong, but it didn’t feel sufficient to stand with demon nobility.

I’d had to rely on risky gambits to take down Riser and Diodora. I’d never

considered how I might compare to most other demons.

I trained as much as possible to ensure I could hold my own against all those crazy-strong opponents who kept showing up, most notably Vali, of course.

Ddraig laughed. *“Heh. You’re already an exception to the rule, what with your being the vessel of a Heavenly Dragon, and your target is the strongest White Dragon Emperor to have ever lived, too. Your goals were too high from the get-go, and then you kept developing your skills to reach those impossible dreams. It’s no surprise you surpassed other demons without realizing it. By the end of the summer, you’d surpassed your own master, Rias Gremory. That woman is by no means weak... Your growth rate as the Red Dragon Emperor is nothing short of incredible.”*

Sure, but my development is slow compared to previous Red Dragon Emperors, right? It was so poor that I’d literally wept from my lack of talent.

“Yes, you’re certainly a late bloomer in some respects... But your unprecedented amount of growth can’t be denied. It’s wrong to compare you to my other vessels. I shudder to think that we haven’t even seen your peak form yet... Regrettably, the key to your advancement is always breasts... Hahhh...”

The venerable Red Dragon Emperor let out a deep sigh. Perhaps it was best to let that conversation be for now.

Looking for a way to occupy myself, I spotted something that immediately made me smile.

“Here, Koneko. Try this. And this one, too.”

“I can feed myself. I don’t need you to grab food for me.”

“It’s not like I’m taking care of you because I want to. It’ll make Issei sad if you don’t get better.”

“...Okay. I’ll eat it... Thank you.”

“Think nothing of it! This is only to get you back to your usual self so we can compete properly!”

Ravel and Koneko were talking not too far away.

They tended to argue a lot, but they seemed to be opening up to each other.

It was a good sign.

“I shall stare at Ddraig.”

Ophis was staring from a corner of the room. All the while, she slowly brought bites of pasta to her mouth... If the people who worked at the hotel realized that she was a terrorist boss, we'd be in serious trouble. Thankfully, that was still our little secret.

Kuroka and Le Fay were eating sweets over by themselves. I didn't see Fenrir, but he was probably lurking somewhere by Le Fay. He was one clever wolf. Pets weren't allowed in the hotel, so I understood why he kept hidden.

Er, wait, when did the worst monster imaginable become a pet?

Kuroka was a runaway demon on the Most Wanted list here in the underworld, so she'd concealed her cat ears and tail and was wearing a robe the same style as Le Fay's, albeit of a different color.

To be extra careful, Kuroka had also donned a pair of sunglasses. She'd even adjusted her *qi* flow, so those sensitive to that energy wouldn't be tipped off. She'd done the same for Le Fay and Ophis, which was probably why no one seemed to eye them with suspicion.

That Kuroka hadn't been caught yet suggested she knew how to move undetected when she wanted to.

It was all starting to fit together. These people were so adept at sneaking around, which was why they always appeared in unexpected places. In fact, when Team Vali's members first dropped by the Hyoudou residence, the others didn't even realize it... In that respect, they were clearly more capable than we were.

While I thought about that, Azazel staggered over, drunk.

“Issei, Kiba. Even among the Gremory Familia, you two are exceptional.”

“Exceptional...?” Kiba repeated.

Azazel nodded. “You're both young demons with incredible potential. Issei might lack talent, but he's the Red Dragon Emperor. He's pushed himself beyond previous Red Dragon Emperors and even managed to awaken a power

that's the polar opposite of his Juggernaut Drive. And you, Kiba. Whether you manage to develop new abilities later, you've still got standout strength already. And you're still growing. Awakening *two* Balance Breakers—that's unbelievable. And you've both been training together, helping each other improve... At this rate, you two might manage to land ultimate-class demon titles before Rias makes her professional debut, eh?"

Reaching ultimate class before Rias's debut... I was already overjoyed by the prospect of reaching middle class. If I attained ultimate class, I'd be rendered speechless for at least ten days.

It was unusual for a member of a high-class demon's household to be promoted to middle class before their master's professional debut, so in that sense, we were already bolstering Rias's reputation.

"I'm blessed," Kiba said. "In Issei, I have a Heavenly Dragon—the Red Dragon Emperor—by my side. There's no better training partner. And on top of that, he's always breaking his limits. It's an honor to practice with him."

Come on, don't embarrass me here!

"How can you say all that mushy stuff with a smile on your face...! Geez. I've learned a lot from you, too. You're a genius technical fighter. And tricky opponents like you are one of my biggest weaknesses."

Azazel shook his head. "No, you have a bigger problem. One that leaves you exposed to any opponent. Your Triaina and True Queen need immense stamina. They both consume a *lot* of strength. How long are you able to maintain your True Queen?"

"...To be honest, the power is still too unstable, so sometimes it fizzles out after a single hit. It's challenging to maintain."

I hated to admit it, but yeah, I had serious difficulty with my True Queen ability.

Stabilizing my True Queen meant improving my various Triaina forms. To increase the power output and defense of my True Queen, I would need to keep developing my Triaina Rook form. Likewise, to enhance its speed, I had to hone my Triaina Knight. And magic attacks meant practicing with Triaina Bishop.

Each of these individual pieces would have to grow to increase the power of my True Queen. That was simply how it worked. The only thing to do was push the three separate components.

I'd awakened my Triaina during the battle in Kyoto, and my True Queen form in that against Sairaorg Bael. Thanks to those advancements, I was able to unleash the innate power of my Heavenly Dragon, dramatically extending the limits of my Sacred Gear. Although I, owner of the Boosted Gear, was pretty shabby overall, my only choice was to keep pushing forward one step at a time.

"I need to improve my Triaina forms and master them. My True Queen uses aspects of all of them," I said.

You could say the True Queen was a reflection of my training in each area.

It remained unstable only because I lacked sufficient practice. And it would remain useless until I developed the three facets of my Triaina. The battle against Sairaorg had made that very clear.

If I do get better control of my True Queen, will it help keep it from draining my stamina so quickly? That seemed a reasonable assumption to me. Unfortunately, Azazel swiftly dashed that hope.

"Stabilizing its power likely won't solve the exhaustion issue. Your True Queen is a new ability that doesn't tax your soul but consumes immense power. It won't eat away at your life span or aura, but the strength has to come from *somewhere*—your stamina."

So it was such a massive drain because it didn't affect my life force? This was the result of my choosing a power different from Juggernaut Drive...

I'd have to find a means to make up for this weakness somehow. For now, it was impossible to use my Triaina for an extended period in its True Queen form. I'd been pitted against legendary opponents in short battles and come out okay, but not every big-name opponent would go down so easily. Eventually, there would be a lengthy battle.

I could maintain my Balance Breaker for much longer than before, and there wasn't a risk of it failing, except in extraordinary circumstances. The Triaina was another matter, though. It consumed so much strength. Any sort of combo with

it demanded so much of me, leaving me utterly drained after the fight. Still, it was preferable to my Juggernaut Drive, which made me run berserk and reduced my life span.

At that moment, an idea came to mind.

“Hey, Teach, that Longinus that operated by itself, Sairaorg’s Regulus, had something kind of like a Juggernaut Drive, didn’t it? Didn’t you say that Sacred Gears with dragons or strong creatures sealed inside them could pull off something similar?”

“As far as the system is concerned, yeah, it’s possible. The Regulus Nemea and other creatures sealed within Sacred Gears can perform something called Break Down the Beast. A Heavenly Dragon’s Juggernaut Drive is still more powerful, however. Break Down the Beast is a special exception, you could say, but it’s dangerous. You shouldn’t use it. It’ll send you on a rampage and drain your life force until it kills you.”

Ah, sounds like it’s basically the same thing. Better steer clear of it, then.

“Now that the three great powers are working together, Longinuses need to be reported to each group when they’re found, right? But, Teach, I remember you said you didn’t know Sairaorg had one. Isn’t that a breach of the alliance?” I asked. The leaders of Heaven and Hell had long been searching for and monitoring those with Longinuses.

A demon had recruited the Regulus Nemea, so Sirzechs should have mentioned it to Azazel.

However, Azazel had only found out about it during our Rating Game with Sairaorg. It didn’t seem like the kind of thing Sirzechs would keep quiet about. The whole situation felt off.

“Apparently, Sirzechs didn’t know about it,” Azazel answered, sighing. “From what I gather, the great prince sect told Sairaorg to keep the identity of his Pawn a secret. Sairaorg was intent on telling the Demon Kings, but if he’s the next head of the Bael family, he has to follow the rules of the current head. The great prince faction didn’t even want him to reveal the Regulus Nemea during the match. He was supposed to keep its identity under wraps, even if he used it.”

“But it was revealed,” I remarked.

“Yup. I figure Sairaorg was fed up with the great prince faction. If he could engineer an opportunity to reveal the Regulus Nemea, he was going to take it. And as a result, the great prince sect is presently under heavy scrutiny by the Demon King side. The Grigori and Heaven have also voiced their dissatisfaction about this to the demons.”

All that took place during the match? I never thought the bigwigs in the great prince faction would try to keep Sairaorg from unveiling a Longinus. Still, Sairaorg had brought it out anyway. He’d wanted to give that fight his all.

The demon factions were far more divided than I’d imagined. Hopefully, the situation wouldn’t descend into another civil war, as it had with the old Demon King regime.

If it did, I guess I’d have to help out the current Demon Kings. But those Lucifer guys had a Longinus! What a pain!

Ah, that reminded me of one other thing about Longinuses.

“...Teach. What about the True Longinus’s Truth Idea? Is that similar to a Juggernaut Drive of Break Down the Beast? Does that spear have something locked inside it, too?”

“There’s no monster sealed in it. However, it contains something akin to the will of God as recorded in the Bible.”

The will of God, huh? What a powerful image. The ultimate spear carried an unbelievable secret, I guess.

“A spear capable of killing a deity—the first Longinus. The Biblical God left it here in the wider world as power for humans—a Sacred Gear. His precise reasons for doing so are still a matter of debate within my organization. Some think it was intended to garner believers even in the absence of God, to aid in invading foreign territories. That would certainly explain its power to fell divine beings of other religions. Others suggest its purpose is to defend against foreign gods. I know a few people who think the spear was merely a product of chance. Not even the angels in Heaven can agree on a theory. Whatever the reason, other Sacred Gears began to appear after that spear, leading people to whisper

about god-slaying Longinuses.”

The first Longinus... So mine was only discovered afterward?

“Each Longinus has been changing recently, more so than ever before. I wouldn’t be surprised if more were discovered, a fourteenth or even fifteenth Longinus,” Azazel said.

A new Longinus... As the bearer of one myself, I knew how dangerous that could be. The few we had now were risky enough, and knowing there might be more soon... Given my luck, I was legitimately afraid more might pop up in the hands of enemies.

“...”

Asia, sitting nearby, had fallen into contemplation. She wasn’t eating much, instead endlessly sipping her juice.

“What’s wrong, Asia?” I inquired.

“I ought to find out a little more about my Sacred Gear,” she answered quietly.

“To improve your healing ability?”

She nodded. “After hearing that Gasper went to Azazel’s research institute, I thought maybe I might try that, too.”

The battle with Sairaorg had evidently made everyone determined to better themselves. Even Gasper, that closeted shut-in, had found the courage to knock on the Grigori’s door all by himself.

However, Asia’s healing ability was already strong and worked well close or far. I couldn’t count the number of times she’d saved us.

That didn’t look like enough for Asia, though. She wore an unusually serious look. Her usual cute smile had become a resolute expression.

“Azazel. I would like to ask you two questions,” she said. “Can the Twilight Healing reach a Balance Breaker? And would I be able to unlock it?”

Azazel took another swallow of his drink. “To answer the first one: Yeah. Our predictions show there ought to be a Balance Breaker. I think it’s possible for

you to unlock it, too. Given how Issei, our Red Dragon Emperor, tends to trigger so many irregular phenomena, you should be able to attain your Balance Breaker by training near him. But Asia..." Azazel paused, looking a bit troubled. "Your powers are already close to perfect."

"What does that mean?" she pressed.

"Exactly what I said. Your ability is already exceptional. You've saved Issei and the others from all sorts of perilous situations. You're already using your Sacred Gear to its fullest. Compared to other vessels of the Twilight Healing, the strength and speed of your restorative powers are top-notch. Honestly, the range you have with your Sacred Gear is way above normal, too. Even if you unlocked your Balance Breaker, it would probably just be a scaled-up version of what you already have."

Azazel had nothing but praise for Asia's abilities, and I felt the same. Her skills had certainly reached a high level. So long as our enemies didn't target her specifically, we could fight with peace of mind. We knew that even if we were wounded, she would be there to help so we could continue fighting.

Despite saying that she wanted to become stronger, Asia looked conflicted after hearing the compliment.

"You're central to this Familia, Asia," Azazel continued. "Healers are vital. Of everyone in the Gremory Familia—no, out of everyone here—you're the most important one in battle. You could ask any one of us, and we would all tell you the same thing. Surely, you must have realized this as well, right?"

Asia nodded.

"Then do you know what your weakness is?"

"...That I can't do anything besides heal?"

"Not quite. There's a bit of difference. You should concentrate on helping the others, certainly. You can leave most of the fighting to Issei. However, your value makes you a target. Losing you is a big blow to the team. Someone always needs to be with you to keep you safe during a fight. That can weaken the overall formation and interrupt the rhythm of battle... Your weakness is that you don't have a way of defending yourself. That's what you need. Some

barrier, illusion, or summoning magic could work. You might forge a covenant with a creature that can shield you and then call upon it when necessary. With a bit of protection, Issei and the others wouldn't need to worry about keeping you safe... Hey, Rias. Asia here already has a pact with a Sprite Dragon, right?"

Rias nodded. "Yes. It's her familiar."

They were talking about the high-ranking baby dragon that Asia had recruited in the Familiar Forest. She played with it at home all the time. Supposedly, it would grow to be as large as Old Man Tannin one day—a dozen or so meters long. That was a scary thought. How much would it cost to feed?

"This is a bit out of left field, but maybe Asia's got a knack for taming creatures? I can't believe I never picked up on that before. How about I introduce you to some legendary monsters, and you try making pacts with them? It could go pretty smoothly. Find something that can protect you during battle..."

Before I knew it, Azazel started talking to himself about ways to improve Asia's overall performance in battle.

I agreed that it would be great if she could summon a creature to protect her. In the last group battle during our match against Sairaorg, we kept Asia out of the fight because we couldn't spare a person to keep her safe. With her healing abilities, she would've been the prime target. Trying to balance offense and defense with her in place would've been too risky.

However, things would be different if she could call upon some powerful beast for aid.

For whatever reason, that match against Sairaorg had spurred everyone in the Familia to seek ways to improve. Certain members were keeping their ideas secret; we all wanted to grow in preparation for what came next. Gasper and Rossweisse, both of whom were currently absent, would undoubtedly return to us considerably stronger than they had been before.

I was no different. I had to get stronger. My rivals were all incredibly powerful, after all. *I can do this*, I thought with renewed determination.

Out of nowhere, I was struck by a feeling of discomfort. A slimy, nauseating

sensation washed over me, and the atmosphere in the restaurant changed in the blink of an eye. It nearly convinced me I'd been transported to another location.

“...”

Azazel must have sensed it, too, as his expression turned grim and he glanced around. Kiba did the same. Someone was approaching us—Kuroka.

Her cat ears and tail were sticking out, twitching as she walked. She was back in her regular kimono, too, a mocking sort of smile plastered across her face.

“Dear me, has Vali been hoodwinked, *meow*? Looks like the main event is headed this way.”

Vali? The main event? I had little time to ponder Kuroka's cryptic words, because a familiar mist filled our surroundings...



We all rushed out of the hotel restaurant, including Kuroka and Ophis. I began my Balance Breaker countdown while running.

The once-bustling hotel was now completely empty! There could be no mistaking it—this was the same fog that we'd encountered in Kyoto!

We'd been teleported again! That mist took us to an artificial dimension that re-created the hotel!

“Issei!” Xenovia called out. “Is this...?”

“Yeah. It has to be. I couldn't forget this fog if I tried!”

Only that mist-wielding mage was capable of this!

We stepped carefully into the spacious lobby, which was empty save for two men resting arrogantly on a nearby sofa.

A ball of flame came hurtling our way, straight for Asia and Irina!

Thankfully, it didn't connect. Ophis stepped in its path, extinguishing it effortlessly.

Did she do that to protect them?

“Th-thank you...,” Asia said.

“...” Ophis remained unresponsive.

I peered at the sofa, recognizing the two lounging. One was a boy in a robe, while the other was a young black-haired man wearing Chinese attire. Both of their outfits were fitted over school uniforms.

The man in the Chinese attire tapped a spear against his shoulder. “Hey, it’s been a while, Red Dragon Emperor. Same to you, Governor Azazel. Haven’t seen you guys since Kyoto. Let’s cut to the chase. That was payback for your strike with Durendal last time.”

“Cao Cao!” I spat the man’s name.

He wielded the Holy Spear, the mightiest of all Longinuses, and led the Hero Faction! This was the guy who attacked us in Kyoto. The wound I’d dealt to his eye was gone.

Given the damage he’d sustained, I wouldn’t have been surprised if he’d lost the use of that eye. There should have been some kind of lasting damage, at least. Regardless, we had to be careful. He’d hurled a fireball straight for Asia! Who cared if it was revenge for Xenovia’s opening attack in Kyoto?!

“Your match against Bael the other day was magnificent,” Cao Cao praised us, clapping his hands. “A fierce fistfight between two combatants clad in Balance Breaker armor. For one who adores combat, it was electrifying. Let me congratulate you, Gremory Familia, for securing the title of the strongest upcoming demon team. You’ve gathered an impressive lineup, Rias Gremory. A most frightening one.”

“Compliments from a terrorist leader? Should I consider this an honor? I’m of two minds. Greetings, Cao Cao,” Rias answered with a cynical grin.

“Yes, nice to meet you. I only saw you briefly back in Kyoto, so this is our first true encounter. I was quite surprised when you were summoned. It was quite the stimulating experience.”

Rias raised a hand to her forehead. “Not another word! I’m embarrassed just thinking about it!”

That was all my fault! I was the one who’d pulled her to Kyoto in the most absurd way imaginable! What an awful way to meet someone!

“So why have you brought us to another of your artificial dimensions? Surely, you’re after something,” Azazel demanded.

Cao Cao’s eyes shot through our group toward Ophis. “Yo, Ophis. I thought you’d be sticking close to Vali, but here you are. Gotta say, I wasn’t expecting this.”

Kuroka stepped in front of the Infinite Dragon. “We’re surprised, too, *meow*. We thought you’d be chasing Vali for a while.”

“I sent a different team after him. They’re probably fighting as we speak.”

What’s he talking about? I couldn’t keep up. I knew Vali’s group and Cao Cao’s had parted ways, but that was all. I watched on, confused and trying to figure out what was happening.

Le Fay abruptly raised a hand in the air and grinned. After clearing her throat, she launched into joyful explanation while a gray wolf emerged from the shadows, glaring at Cao Cao.

“Um, there are two main points to what’s going on. The first is that Ophis is very interested in the Red Dragon Emperor, the so-called Breast Dragon. When Vali learned this, he offered to set up a meeting using his connections.”

I knew all that. It’s what had brought Ophis to my house.

“The second is that Vali learned someone was plotting an attack on Ophis. Knowing this, we opted to flush her assailants. We hoped to use Ophis as bait to force a direct confrontation. Um, yeah, that’s basically it.”

Le Fay sheepishly pointed at Cao Cao and his accomplice. “Those guys are after Ophis and the rest of us, and we thought they might strike if she ventured out from our headquarters. The plan was to crush them when they tried. But we never intended to put the real Ophis in danger. Bikou disguised himself as a fake Ophis and ventured out with Vali. We only came to the Breast Dragon Emperor’s place to hide.”

H-hold on a second! I looked between Cao Cao, Ophis, and Azazel. *Wait, wait, wait! I know that Team Vali and the Hero Faction don’t get along, and I get that someone wants Ophis out of the way... But why is it Cao Cao?!*

Wh-wh-what's going on here?! I—I mean, aren't they all part of the Khaos Brigade...?! Ophis is technically their boss, right?!

Everyone in the Gremory Familia was stunned! Azazel was, too! Only Kuroka, Le Fay, and Cao Cao remained calm!

Cao Cao nodded at Le Fay's explanation, tapping his spear against his shoulder. "Well, I know Vali, and he wouldn't just take Ophis with him out of the base for a stroll. We suspected it was a ploy from the start. We also knew that Ophis took an interest in the recent transformations of the Red and White Dragon Emperors. As such, we decided to split into two squads to launch a surprise attack. One pursued Vali, while Georg and I came here to check in on the Red Dragon Emperor. And sure enough, our target is here."

I was still confused, but it sounded like Vali had hoped to lure out Cao Cao with a fake Ophis to keep the real one safe. Unfortunately, that bastard hero suspected we had the real Ophis and came here instead, and his guess was right!

"Cao Cao, do you seek to kill me?" Ophis asked placidly, her head cocked to one side.

"Yes, Ophis. We need you—but we've decided we don't need the *current* you."

"I do not understand. But I will not lose to you, Cao Cao."

"No, of course not. You're too powerful. To be perfectly honest, I have no idea how a direct attack will work... But let's give it a shot." He stood from the couch and twirled his spear.



Shiiiiing!

The tip of the weapon opened, releasing a dazzling blade of light! The weapon's divine radiance sent a dread chill down my spine. Holy radiance was lethal to demons...

Whoosh!

Cao Cao disappeared into thin air! Damn it, he was fast! He'd straight up vanished without even starting into a run first or anything!

Fwoom!

When he reappeared, his spear had pierced deep into Ophis's abdomen! A fatal blow! If she were a demon, it would have killed her instantly!

"Shine, O god-slaying spear!" Cao Cao yelled at the top of his voice.

Shiiiiing!

A huge flash of light spilled out in all directions!

"This is bad, *meow*. Le Fay?" Kuroka said.

The two of them quickly started muttering something, and a dark fog formed around us in response!

"This vapor diminishes light. It's quite thick, and poisonous, too, so don't breathe in too much! This is the only way to weaken that Holy Spear's radiant power!" Le Fay called out.

"And it takes both of us to pull this off, *meow*," Kuroka added.

The glow from the Holy Spear spread throughout the hotel.

The dark fog couldn't hide the light. It was almost blinding! I shudder to think what might have become of us if in the aftermath of Cao Cao's attack if not for the mist.

Finally, the light dissipated, and the dark fog along with it. I stared at Cao Cao and Ophis.

The girl was still impaled on the spear...yet there was no sign of blood, and her face showed no pain.

Cao Cao slowly withdrew his weapon. It left only a gaping hole. No blood gushed from the wound. Within seconds, the injury closed as though it had never been there.

Did it even hurt her? All that holy light, and it did nothing?

“If you were a demon, that would have killed you instantly,” Cao Cao said, looking exasperated. “I even supercharged it to the point that it should have vaporized most other beings, too. An attack with half the power would have slain a Buddha or god.”

Cao Cao turned his gaze to me. “Did you see that, Red Dragon Emperor? This is Ophis. Not even the strongest Longinus can fell her. The damage simply passed through... The Holy Spear is not enough to bring down the Infinite Dragon.”

Ophis represented infinity. Was that spear useless against her?

“She won’t even retaliate against me, even after striking her,” Cao Cao went on, tapping his spear on his shoulder. “The reason is simple—she can kill me whenever she pleases, so I’m not worth the effort. She’s only interested in the Great Red. Of the top five most powerful entities other than the Great Red, she ranks highest. And the disparity between her and the second-strongest is massive. This is what it means to be the personification of infinity.”

Ophis was *that* strong, and Cao Cao and the rest of the Hero Faction still hoped to kill her? If they wanted it that badly, there had to be a good reason. And that begged the question... What did they want?

Not even Cao Cao can beat her? Maybe he can if he uses his Balance Breaker or Truth Idea? No, he’s already essentially acknowledged that he can’t win.

Suddenly, light exploded before me, and a teleportation-type magic circle appeared beneath Kuroka and Le Fay’s feet! They must have activated the array!

“Ha-ha-ha, *meow*. We linked up while you were busy with this sideshow...,” Kuroka said with a sneer. “Let’s go, Le Fay. It’s about time we called him, *meow!*”

The gray wolf—Fenrir—stepped into the center of the circle as it grew

brighter and brighter!

When it finally subsided, Fenrir was gone. Instead, a man was standing in his place.

A beautiful youth with blue eyes and dark silver hair...

Vali!

The magic circle had swapped Fenrir for him.

“Good work, Kuroka, Le Fay... It’s been a while since we last met face-to-face, Cao Cao.”

Cao Cao, confronted with a new foe, broke into a wry grin. “Vali. Now this is a surprise.”

Le Fay drew a fresh magic circle in the air with her rod. “I’ve called Vali here, switching his location with Fenrir’s!”

“I’ll let Fenrir fight your Hero Faction allies with Bikou and the others. I anticipated that you might come here instead, Cao Cao, so I made arrangements just in case... Now, let’s settle things. Pretty bold of you to attack with only Georg to back you up.”

There are teleportation techniques that swap people around? This was my first time seeing it in action. It must have been special, since it required Le Fay and Kuroka to work together.

Hey, Vali, were you actually expecting Cao Cao to come here?

“I wouldn’t call it bold,” Cao Cao said with a smirk. “Georg and I are enough for this.”

“How confident. Are you planning to show off Dragon Eater? I’m guessing it’s someone with a Sacred Gear specializing in killing dragons or a new Longinus,” Vali said.

Cao Cao shook his head. “You’re mistaken, Vali. Dragon Eater is a codename we gave to a being that already existed. We didn’t create it... The Biblical God already saw to that.”

The robed youth, Georg, asked. “Cao Cao, are you sure?”

“Yes. It’s time, Georg. Vali, Ophis, and the Red Dragon Emperor are all here. The Infinite Dragon and the two Heavenly Dragons. It’s the perfect combination, don’t you think? Let’s lift the lid on the cauldron of Hell.”

“Understood. It’s time to devour infinity...” Georg’s lips twisted into a smile as a gigantic magic array formed behind him in the hotel lobby.

Brrrrr-rrrrrr-rrrrrr...

A violent tremor rocked the entire structure, and a dark, ominous aura seeped from Georg’s array.

A chill blast sent a shudder down my spine. An unprecedented level of pressure was emanating from the magic circle. I felt like a rabbit in the eyes of a hawk!

“This presence... Overwhelming malice for dragons...!”

Even Ddraig was nervous. He must have sensed it, too. For this to frighten him, a dragon, the living embodiment of bravery, it had to be terrible.

Something huge began to emerge from that ominous summoning array.

A head. A torso... Black wings. A cross...?

Something had been nailed to that cross. Restraints all over their body held them tight, and each was alight with creepy, shifting symbols. One covered the being’s eyes while tears of blood flowed from beneath it.

—! The sight of the full thing after it had emerged from the magic circle stopped my breath for a moment. It’s lower body...was that of a snake! It even had scales! It was long and slender like an Asian dragon! However, the being’s upper half resembled a fallen angel’s! Countless nails had been driven through its hands, its tail, its entire body! Even its jet-black wings!

Merely looking at it was painful. A crucified creature, part fallen angel, part dragon, bound a hundred times over. To be crucified... In the distant past, it was a punishment for grave sinners. This was the personification of vengeful judgment.

“Aaaaauuuuugggggghhhhh...”

An eerie voice erupted from the mouth of the sinner, echoing throughout the

lobby. Saliva and blood sprayed from its fang-baring mouth.

Pain, envy, suffering, resentment. That sound was a dark concoction of negative emotions.

It was clear just from looking at the sinner that they had been judged with extreme prejudice.

A black mist and a sinister aura spread from the fallen angel–dragon to fill the lobby... It felt like my skin was being stabbed all over; a sickening sensation filled me...

Azazel’s eyes twitched in visible anger. “Y-you... How could you...? Did you break the seal on Cocytus...?!”

Cao Cao stepped forward, humming as though reciting a poem. “The so-called Poison of God, or God’s Malice. The taboo being that led those in the Garden of Eden to eat the forbidden fruit. The primordial sin that gave rise to the curse of the now-deceased Biblical God—our Dragon Eater, Samael. An angel and a serpent-dragon cursed by God. Yes, a dragon, one whose existence was erased from history...”

“—————!—————”

Hearing the name of the crucified fallen angel–dragon, everyone but me recoiled in shock.

“...Teach,” I began. “Er. Um... I can see it’s looks pretty dangerous, but...”

“You know the story of Adam and Eve, yeah?”

“U-um, I’ve heard of it.”

The first man and woman, right? The couple from the Garden of Eden?

“He disguised himself as a serpent and made Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit,” Azazel explained. “That was what brought about the Biblical God’s wrath. It’s also why dragons are portrayed as evil in plenty of Christian books. He received all the malice, the poison, and the full brunt of the Biblical God’s curse. However, it’s supposed to be impossible for God, a sacred being, to experience malice—which is why it manifested as a deadly poison. It can annihilate other dragons, too. Thus it was supposed to have been sealed in the depths of

Cocytus. That curse is the ultimate Dragon Slayer—which means this being is, too...!”

A fallen angel despised by God...? A serpent-dragon! The Poison of God, God’s Malice...!

That explanation alone was enough to convince me how dangerous this was...! What kind of monster had Cao Cao brought?! God’s fury made a toxin directed specifically at dragons?! Didn’t that make this thing practically lethal to me?!

“What was Hades thinking, letting this thing free from his domain? No! I-it can’t be...!” Azazel seemed to have deduced the answer to his own question.

“That’s right, we negotiated with him,” Cao Cao replied with a grin. “He permitted us to summon Samael so long as we maintain several layers of binds and restrictions.”

“That bastard! He’s that upset over Zeus cooperating with other factions?!” Azazel spat out in disgust.

That skeleton god had lent his strength to the Hero Faction?! There was no doubt about it; this major incident would sow chaos between various factions! I knew that Hades despised demons and fallen angels, but who would’ve thought he’d stoop to helping terrorists?!

Cao Cao spun his Holy Spear, leveling the tip at us. “Listen, Azazel, Vali, Red Dragon Emperor—the curse placed on Samael consumes and destroys dragons. It is undeniable. A simple dragon-slaying sword doesn’t hope to compare. Your Ascalon is no more than a toothpick in the face of Samael, Issei Hyoudou.”

Calling the Ascalon a toothpick...! Honestly, judging by the overwhelming hatred washing over us, it was clear that Samael was on a completely different level to my Holy Sword!

“What are you planning to do with him?! Are you trying to exterminate the dragon species...?! No, don’t tell me...Ophis...?” Azazel’s eyes shot to the Infinite Dragon in our protection.

The corners of Cao Cao’s mouth quirked up, and he snapped his fingers. “Devour her.”

Whoosh!

Something passed between us at high speed!

Grrrrr-augh! There was a sound like something was being gulped down.

Looking around hurriedly, I saw a huge black mass, one large enough to envelop a whole person, where Ophis had been a moment before!

What on earth?!

Some tentacle-like appendage extended from the mass, and by following that back to its source, I saw that it led to the fallen angel–dragon’s mouth! It was his tongue!

Samael swallowed Ophis?!

I was taken aback by this sudden development, but I understood well enough that it couldn’t mean anything good for Samael’s tongue to be wrapped around Ophis like that!

“Hey, Ophis! Answer me!” I called out to the black mass, but there was no response!

This was bad! The situation was spiraling out of control!

“Yuuto! Cut it!” Rias ordered.

Kiba quickly forged a Holy Demon Sword and attacked, but that *thing* swallowed the weapon, too, destroying the blade! Only the hilt remained in Kiba’s hands!

“...It erased a Holy Demon Sword? Can that dark gunk destroy oncoming attacks?”

Kiba conjured another sword, this time aiming for the tentacle-tongue linking the mass to Samael. The result was the same, the blade split in two where it made contact!

“Half Dimension!”

As Vali unfurled his luminous wings, the Divine Dividing, the sound blaring from his Sacred Gear warped his surroundings, reducing everything by half. Yep, this was his signature ability! Unfortunately, it didn’t have any visible effect on

that weird lump or Samael's tongue.

Hold on, when did he learn to pull that off without activating his Balance Breaker?!

"How about this, then?"

The next moment, Vali unleashed a wave of magical energy from his hand—but it was consumed by the black mass, leaving no trace it had ever been there. There wasn't even a scratch! It hadn't sustained any damage whatsoever! Not even Vali could get through!

"In that case, let's try the power of destruction magic!"

Rias unleashed a barrage of power, yet it seemed pointless, like everything else. Was that mass impossibly tough, or did it somehow have the ability to repel any and all attacks?

Kr-gah-kr-gah...

The tentacle attached to the dark mass swelled with an uncanny sound, and the enlarged portion slithered toward Samael's mouth. It seemed to be absorbing something from the trapped Ophis, consuming it...

Cao Cao ordered that thing to devour her, so... No, it can't be!

This called for my Balance Breaker!

I quickly activated my Red Dragon Emperor armor and promoted to a regular Queen! But before I could attack the thing enveloping Ophis, Azazel stopped me.

"Issei! Don't fight him! That guy is your ultimate natural enemy! Vali's nothing compared to him! His powers can slay dragons effortlessly! And he seems to be able to nullify our attacks! Even Ophis can't escape! Do you understand what that says about our situation? And don't try Ascalon! There's no telling how it might respond to the ultimate Dragon Slayer!"

"But won't we be in huge trouble if it takes Ophis?!" I cried back.

Xenovia quickly leaped forward, lunging at Samael with Durendal and bringing a tremendous wave of holy light crashing down on him.

Vrrrrnnn!

However, another force knocked the surge of power away—Cao Cao's Holy Spear!

"Another good opening salvo, Xenovia. But the same trick won't work twice," he said, wagging his finger from side to side.

"I thought I had my timing right... Am I that easy to read...?" Xenovia muttered.

Her attack had seemed flawless to me, but I guess since she'd tried the same maneuver back in Kyoto, Cao Cao was prepared for it this time. He'd repelled the attack with little difficulty.

Man, Xenovia sure liked to launch into surprise attacks!

There was a brilliant flash, and Vali's armor formed around him. "A battle with Samael and two others armed with Longinuses. I can't complain."

Kuroka and Le Fay adopted battle stances.

It wasn't like I was waiting for his signal or anything, but I also prepped myself for a fight, and so did the rest of the Gremory Familia. Azazel even donned his golden Fafnir armor!

One thing was clear: If our attacks were ineffective against that black mass and the tentacle-tongue, then our only option was to attack Samael directly!

We couldn't allow these guys to take Ophis, especially because we still didn't know what their end goal was!

"Ravel! You're our guest and my manager, too. You're too important, and I don't want to put you in danger. Please stay behind us."

Ravel nodded at my sincere request, moving to the rear. That was for the best. Ravel's mother had entrusted her to us, but I didn't think that made it okay for her to take part in deadly combat. If the worst happened, I'd make sure she could get away. That said, I wasn't about to let anyone else die, either. Least of all myself!

Seeing us all ready ourselves for combat, Cao Cao broke into an ecstatic grin. "Guess I should go all out. It would be stupid not to. Hades is only letting us use

Samael this once. If we don't succeed here, our plan will fail. Georg! I'll leave controlling Samael to you. I'll deal with the others."

"Can you take two Heavenly Dragons, the governor of the fallen angels, and the Gremory Familia all by yourself?" Georg asked, still managing Samael.

"Let's give it a try. If I can't match them, I'm not worthy of this spear. Balance Breaker."

Cao Cao's weapon shone with power. His body underwent a transformation, a divine halo appearing above him while seven bowling ball-size spheres of light formed behind him.

This was a pretty simple Balance Breaker, all things considered. I'd seen plenty of Sacred Gears pushed into their Balance Breaker modes, but this was the least complex transformation of them all. The spear remained essentially unchanged.

Cao Cao stepped forward, and those seven spheres followed after him.

"This is the True Longinus's Balance Breaker, the Polar Night Longinus Chakravartin... However, it's still incomplete."

"—! A variant-type Balance Breaker!" Azazel shouted as he beheld the transformation. "The Holy Spear's Balance Breaker has always been the True Longinus Götterdämmerung! That name—*Chakravartin*. Are you implying that you're an ideal universal ruler? And those orbs... Damn it, I'm not even sure what they are."

"I like to think of myself as the ideal ruler of Heaven. That sounds a lot cooler, don't you think?"

I had no idea what Cao Cao was mouthing off about there, but I never thought his Holy Spear was a variant type! What sort of abilities did it have?!

"Stay sharp," Vali cautioned. "That Balance Breaker has an ability called the Seven Treasures. Each sphere has its own separate power."

Seemed today was just full of surprises.

"Seven?! Not just two or three?!"

"Yeah, seven. They're all pretty fearsome, too. Although I only know three of

them myself. There's a reason it's called the ultimate Longinus. There's no doubting Cao Cao is the strongest pure-blooded human alive. Yes...the strongest *human*."

Vali spoke pretty highly of him... Still, Cao Cao felt less intimidating than Samael, and I'd felt more uneasy during the match against Sairaorg. This was no time to get careless, however.

This guy had nearly killed me during our fight in Kyoto, and he'd done that without his Balance Breaker.

Cao Cao thrust his free hand forward—and one of the seven spheres responded.

"One of the Seven Treasures—Cakkaratana."

The orb vanished.

Crash!

A shattering sound echoed violently through the lobby.

I looked around, eventually seeing that Xenovia's Ex-Durendal...was utterly destroyed!

"The Ex-Durendal...!" she breathed.

Xenovia had been unable to respond to the sudden attack, and now her weapon was broken! The Excaliburs, fashioned through alchemy into a sheath to control the Durendal's power, lay shattered!

H-h-hold on a minute! How?! All I saw was the sphere vanishing, and then the Ex-Durendal was busted before anyone knew what happened!

None of us were able to react. We gaped in shock at how the weapon had been devastated.

"The Cakkaratana possesses the power to destroy weapons. Only those with consummate skill can withstand it," Cao Cao stated.

Whoosh!

Blood spurted from a gaping hole in Xenovia's abdomen!

"Gah!"

She coughed up blood and collapsed. One glance was enough to recognize it as a fatal wound!

“When I struck, I reshaped the Cakkaratana into a spear and pierced her stomach. Wielder of Durendal, you can’t hope to defeat me if you can’t keep up.”

The rest of us spread out around Cao Cao as he boasted.

“Hurry and heal Xenovia, Asia!” Rias ordered.

Asia stood there in a daze at first but quickly realized just how dire the situation was and rushed to Xenovia’s aid!

“Xenovia! Noooooo!” she shrieked while healing her friend.

...! That bastard! Hurting Xenovia like that! My friend! Fueled by anger, I dashed for Cao Cao with Kiba at my side. He was clearly just as pissed as I was!

“Cao Caooooo!”

“I won’t forgive you!”

Kiba and I launched a combo attack! Cao Cao, however, easily swept us both aside with his Holy Spear and then brought another of his seven orbs close to his hand!

“Itthiratana.”

Wha—?! The sphere passed by us both at high speed, flying toward Rias and Akeno. The two of them were quick to react, readying to retaliate against the orb, and yet...

“Burst!”

In response to Cao Cao’s command, the orb ballooned in size, ensnaring the two!

“Ugh!”

“What is this?!”

Rias and Akeno tried to attack despite being surrounded by that intense light, but nothing happened.

They both looked down at their hands in alarm, then attempted to call their powers again, yet it didn't work!

C-could this be...?!

"Itthiratana completely seals the abilities of women imbued with supernatural powers for a set period of time... That's three down."

Rias and Akeno were shocked by this revelation. He could seal women's powers?! If Rias and Akeno, with all their strength, were rendered ineffective, what could Xenovia, Asia, and Irina hope to do?!

If we lost Asia's healing, we'd be done for! Xenovia was still being healed. Without Asia, she would die!

"Ha-ha-ha!" Cao Cao laughed, clearly relishing this. "Defeating all of you in this pocket dimension... Flashy attacks have a negative effect on Samael's delicate operations. I'll have to make sure not to get too wild. What a wonderfully delicate mission! Now..."

Kuroka's and Le Fay's hands were aglow with magic, ready to attack Georg and Samael! They were aiming for where the enemy's defenses were weakest!

Another of Cao Cao's spheres was sent their way!

"You're impertinent! *Meow!*" Kuroka thrust out her free hand to intercept the oncoming orb!

"Assaratana, move my foes," Cao Cao directed.

With those words, Kuroka and Le Fay vanished, reappearing on the far side of the room!

He teleported them?! My eyes shot wide in disbelief.

Kuroka's and Le Fay's arms were still outstretched, and now they were aiming for Asia, still helping the wounded Xenovia! The attacks had been meant for Samael and Georg, but that forced teleportation gave them a new target!

Balls of fire lanced forward. There was no stopping them now!

"Damn yooooouuuuu! Welsh Sonic Boost Knight!"

"Change: Star Sonic!"

I shifted the Evil Piece within me, purging my armor and flying toward Asia at high speed!

No way can I let him hurt her! Not my precious Asia! Not like this! How dare he divert Team Vali's attacks without even lifting his own damn hand...!

I positioned myself in front of Asia as fast as I could to shield her from the blast. She was so absorbed in treating Xenovia that she couldn't react in time!

Don't worry, I'll protect you Asia!

My current form had weaker armor, and I doubted I'd withstand Kuroka's and Le Fay's magic, but I was willing to risk my life to protect Asia!

B-b-b-booooooooooom!

A huge explosion rang out as both fireballs mercilessly struck my body! Shock and excruciating pain coursed through me!

My thinned Scale Mail was shattered, and I vomited thick, dark liquid in response to the tremendous damage.

"Gah...!"

Blood spurted from my mouth in huge quantities... Damn, that hurt... Words couldn't even begin to describe it...!

The magic destroyed my armor, leaving my body grievously injured, charred black from chest to stomach. My flesh burst open as fresh blood gushed everywhere...

Damn it...

My weakness laid bare... The naked flesh beneath my armor...

Sapped of strength, I collapsed, and as I fell, I saw Cao Cao's sneer.

"I already know of your powers, Red Dragon Emperor. You awoke an immensely powerful, albeit presently unstable, ability in your battle against Bael... You're quite capable, your Triaina combo especially so. But when you change pieces, you leave yourself vulnerable for the briefest moment... All I need is the right strategy to take you down."

That bastard! He had a perfect understanding of my Triaina's strengths and

weaknesses...!

He also understood that I would naturally intervene if an unexpected attack was launched at Asia, and that I'd need my Triaina Knight form to get to her in time, which left me with fragile armor.

Cao Cao had teleported Kuroka and Le Fay in front of Asia as they loosed their magic, anticipating my attempt to intervene...

This guy understood my moves before I made them!

I was no match for him... The gap between our respective levels had never been more obvious!

"Issei!"

Seeing that I had suffered a lethal wound, Asia tried to send out a healing aura. But she was still preoccupied tending to Xenovia. I couldn't let her stop!

"Don't, Asia...! I'm still okay. Treat Xenovia first..."

"But Issei! Your chest...!"

Don't cry, Asia. It's just bleeding... I can withstand this much...!

From my place on the floor, I saw two suits of armor race forward, one gold and the other pure white.

"Vali! Follow me!"

"Seriously? I'd much rather do this alone...!" Vali said as he joined Azazel in a rush for Cao Cao.

They were fast, both closing in immediately!

Azazel's spear of light and Vali's magic-empowered fist sped at Cao Cao!

"A contest against the governor of the fallen angels and the White Dragon Emperor! A win here means I can aim for even greater heights!"

Cao Cao seemed overjoyed, dodging the incoming high-speed blows.

How is he evading?! Is Cao Cao really human?! He's definitely beyond superhuman at this point!

"Armor-type Balance Breakers are certainly magnificent embodiments of

might... But they constantly radiate power! All one needs to do is pay attention to the flows of energy to see where the next attack will come from! Strength concentrated in a weapon or a fist tells me how you intend to strike!” Cao Cao gloated while he dodged.

Is that the weak point of armor-type Balance Breakers?! H-he can really read our moves?! Why does this guy have so many countermeasures against us?!

Cao Cao’s eye suddenly shone gold!

“Do you know what an Evil Eye is?! Yes, a special ability that resides within one’s eyes! I had one transplanted to make up for the one lost to the Red Dragon Emperor! My *new* eye!”

Cao Cao evaded Vali’s and Azazel’s attacks, then fixed the latter in his gaze. Instantly, Azazel’s legs turned to stone!

“The Eye of Medusa!” he exclaimed with a click of his tongue.

Medusa! Even a blockhead like me knew that name! She was a female monster whose head was covered in snakes and could turn anyone who saw her to stone!

Cao Cao transplanted one of her eyes?! So he had those Seven Treasures, the Holy Spear, and a Medusa eye?! Just how much power did this bastard possess?!

Whoosh!

The Holy Spear tore through Azazel’s gut with a dull sound...

The weapon effortlessly crushed his golden armor, gouging clean through his flesh!

“Gah...! This guy’s power is insane...!”

He fell to the ground, coughing up blood.

“I have fought you once before, so I’ve learned how to deal with you.” Cao Cao pulled out his spear. “Your artificial Sacred Gear’s weakness is that it can’t shift Fafnir’s power to suit you.”

“Azazel! Damn you, Cao Caaaaaooooo!”

Enraged by Azazel's defeat, Vali blasted Cao Cao with a massive amount of demonic energy.

"Was it Governor Azazel who scooped you up and taught you how to use your powers after you were cast aside as a monster by your real parents?! Are you enraged to see the man you owe your life to cut down?"

Vali unleashed a surge of destructive power! Not even Cao Cao could hope to avoid a direct hit from that!

However, another of his spheres took off straight for the incoming attack!

"Maniratana, for parrying oncoming attacks to another target. You possess great power, Vali. If you hit me, I would surely die. Your defense is formidable, too... But all I have to do is divert your strikes."

Whooooooooooooosh!

Vali's demonic energy was sucked straight into a black vortex forming in front of the sphere!

Whoosh!

Another vortex formed in Koneko's direction!

Hold on! Cao Cao said he'd parry the attack...! Is this what he meant?! Damn it! Move! Move, body! Moooooove!

Blood still dripping from me, I poured my strength into my legs and pulled myself up.

Gah!

I fell forward, vomiting fresh blood.

Vali's attack shot from the vortex, and it was headed for Koneko!

"Idiot! Get out of the way! Shirone!" Kuroka screamed, lunging forward to shield her sister.

Booooooooooom!

The clamor of the explosion rocked the lobby! Having taken a direct hit from Vali's redirected attack, Kuroka lay on the ground covered in blood. Smoke billowed from her body.

Koneko took her older sister in her arms.

“Wh-what were you standing there in a daze for...?” Kuroka asked, her voice weak.

“S-Sister!” Koneko cried, shaking her head from side to side.

“Cao Cao! You used my own attack to take down my allies...! Y-you...!”

Vali’s aura flared with rage, its force rising to ever greater heights! I had never seen him look so angry! And it was all because Azazel and Kuroka were hurt!

“You focus too much on your friends, Vali. You’re no different than the Red Dragon Emperor writhing pathetically over there on the floor... When did the two Heavenly Dragons get so soft? I know you’ve only seen some of the Seven Treasures, so I made sure to use one you weren’t familiar with. You should be thankful. With this, you’re the only person who knows all of their abilities.”

“Then let me show *you* something! *As the Heavenly Dragon who usurped God’s hegemony...*”

That idiot! Vali! He was starting his Juggernaut Drive chant!



“Georg!” Cao Cao shouted. “His Juggernaut Drive could destroy this artificial dimension!”

“Understood. Samael!”

Georg thrust his hand forward, activating a magic array, and in response, the restraints on Samael’s right hand came flying off!

“Aaaaauuuuuggggghhhh!”

With an ominous cry, Samael’s right hand lanced for Vali!

Whoosh!

The air reverberated as another black mass wrapped around the White Dragon Emperor—just like the one encasing Ophis!

“Aaaaauuuuuggggghhhh!”

With that terrible howl, the dark mass burst, releasing Vali! However, his armor had exploded along with the dark mass, his body now covered in blood!

“Ngh!” Vali groaned, falling facedown on the floor of the lobby!

I couldn’t believe it! That was Vali! The White Dragon Emperor! My ultimate rival! And yet was crushed effortlessly! What kind of freakish monster was this Dragon Eater Samael?!

Cao Cao breathed a sigh as he beheld his bested foe. “How does it taste, Vali? The Poison of God. For dragons, there is said to be no fighting it. Running amok with your Juggernaut Drive here would interfere with our control of Samael. I’m afraid I had to stop you. I’m but a weak human, so the best I can do is target my foes’ weaknesses... Apologies, Vali.”

“Cao Cao...!” Vali looked up at him with obvious hatred in his eyes.

“Not even Ophis can resist Samael. He is her natural enemy. Our assumptions were on the mark.” Cao Cao rested his spear on his shoulder.

As far as I could tell, the black mass enveloping Ophis was still absorbing something from her!

“Hmm, how many are we down to now? With the Red Dragon Emperor, the White Dragon Emperor, and Governor Azazel laid low, the main threats are

presumably gone. The only real remaining contenders are Yuuto Kiba with his Holy Demon Swords, Michael's angel, and Le Fay."

"..."

Le Fay stood frozen, unable to respond to Cao Cao's overwhelming force.

Irina, for her part, shed tears of anger as she gripped her Holy Sword.

"How dare you! Xenovia! Issei! My friends!" Irina seemed ready to lunge forward at any moment.

"Don't, Irina! If you attack blindly, you'll be killed!" Rias called to hold the other girl back. "If we don't do something about the Seven Treasures, he'll counter all our attacks and turn them back on us. The seven orbs all have the same size and shape, making it difficult to read which one he's using. I've never faced a skill so difficult to read. He managed to take down Issei and the others with hardly any effort. He's an incredible opponent, and he's studied how we fight to an unbelievable degree..."

Rias seemed to understand the situation better than I did. Those damn orbs really had us on the ropes. On top of that, Cao Cao had his own physical prowess and that Eye of Medusa. Altogether, it was a thoroughly brutal combination.

"Issei! I've finished treating Xenovia! It's your turn now!" Asia declared.

"See to Kuroka first," I replied.

Asia looked ready to argue for a moment but nodded and hurried to Koneko's sister.

That bastard Cao Cao wasn't even trying to pursue Asia. Was he really that confident?

Shiiiiing!

All of a sudden, a metallic sound screeched throughout the lobby! Kiba was lashing out at Cao Cao with his Holy Demon Sword!

However, his target easily blocked the attack with his Holy Spear.

"You're too strong! But on my pride as a swordsman, I'll land at least one

blow on you!”

“You have fine blade work, Yuuto Kiba. You might even be able to match Siegfried. To be perfectly honest, you’re the only one here who can fight me without suffering any adverse effects. You lack great power, yet you can respond flexibly to any situation. A well-trained Holy Demon Sword capable changing form at will could pose a major problem... Fortunately, you’ve still got a way to go, making you easy to beat.”

Cao Cao swiped the Holy Spear horizontally. Kiba immediately leaped backward, dispelled his Holy Demon Sword, and forged a fresh holy one! At the same time, he summoned up his dragon knights and directed them to attack!

“Oh, your new Balance Breaker! Show me what it can do! This encounter will provide valuable data!” Cao Cao exclaimed ecstatically, sending out his orbs to destroy the squad of dragon knights!

Those spheres functioned a lot like Sirzechs’s orbs of raw power of destruction. The effects were different, but they whizzed freely around the battlefield and attacked in the same sort of way!

Kiba desperately prepared himself to defend us.

Sorry, buddy. You’re the only one of us left standing with any real firepower.

Cao Cao readied his spear, then shook his head and lowered it.

“...There’s no point. I already understand your skill’s fundamental characteristics. You may be fast, but your actual techniques are still lacking. It’s a good idea, though. I look forward to seeing you improve,” Cao Cao said with a sigh.

Kiba looked truly humiliated and furious. As a Knight, he wielded his blade to defend his comrades. Yet his foe simply didn’t care. Could there be any greater display of contempt? The shame must have been awful.

I was similarly enraged. How dare he make light of my friend, our Knight!

“How much did you get?” Cao Cao asked Georg.

“...Three quarters, I would say. Most of it, in any event. I can’t keep Samael bound to this plane any longer.”

The magic circle beneath Samael was losing its luster... Did that mean the creature's time here was limited?

Cao Cao nodded. "Good job. That's enough."

He snapped his fingers, and the black mass enveloping Ophis dispersed. Samael's tentacle-like tongue likewise returned to his mouth, while the fallen angel-dragon himself, evidently having completed his job, sank into the array.

"Aaaaauuuuuggggghhhhh..."

The ultimate Dragon Slayer, having easily bested us all, Vali included, disappeared into the floor with a final anguished groan, the magic circle disappearing soon after.

Ophis, finally released from the black mass, looked much the same as before. However, that attack clearly hadn't been meant to kill her.

So what did it do?

Ophis looked up at the enemy leader. "My power has been stolen. What do you plan to do, Cao Cao?"

Wh-what...? The rest of us watched in mute shock.

Cao Cao grinned with clear satisfaction. "Yes, that's right, Ophis. At first, we wanted to take control of you to make use of your power. But you're too difficult to manipulate. So we changed our approach." He pointed the tip of his Holy Spear toward the sky. "With your power, we will create a new Ouroboros."

"—! ...So *that's* it!" Azazel exclaimed, coughing up blood. "You used Samael to strip away Ophis's powers, all to give rise to...a *new* Ophis..."

"Precisely. We want an Ouroboros who will obey our commands. To be honest, we're not all that concerned with the Great Red. We heroes grew tired of pandering to Ophis, so we began to challenge superior beings to test ourselves with the goal of defeating the Infinite and obtaining her powers."

"...Well played. To take down the Infinite..."

"You've got it wrong, Governor. This is different from defeating her. A symbol is necessary to help recruit greater strength, and Ophis served wonderfully in that respect—a propaganda piece to help our group expand. Unfortunately, a

Dragon God whose intentions are unknowable is terribly inconvenient.”

“What a disgustingly human way of thinking.”

“I’m honored by your praise, Governor. I *am* human,” Cao Cao replied.

A new Ophis? Using the power that Samael had stolen...? They’re going to make one...?

Georg eyed our battered group. “Cao Cao. Can you finish off Vali and Issei Hyoudou now?”

“Right. Better end things while we can... Both are growing increasingly powerful, impossibly so. In the future, these two dragons may pose a more significant threat than Ophis herself. Still, it would be a waste... I’m beginning to see why the leaders of the various factions have taken such an interest in keeping an eye on these two... This generation, this cycle, their advancement is abnormal. And that includes the individuals around them, too... It’s a rare opportunity to collect valuable data. Perhaps they will be the ones to unleash the full power of the Sacred Gear system, not us.”

Cao Cao’s floating spheres vanished. He turned, likely preparing to leave. He’d deactivated his Balance Breaker!

“Let’s stop here for today, Georg. Where is the power that Samael sapped from Ophis now?”

“I designed the magic circle to send it all back to the research facility over at headquarters.”

“Good. Then let’s head back as soon as possible.”

They’re just going to leave?!

“...Cao Cao. Why... Why don’t you kill us...?” Vali demanded as he rose to his feet, blood still coursing down his body. “With your Balance Breaker, you could slaughter everyone here... If you used that anti-woman ability on Asia Argento, you would have finished the Gremory Familia for good.”

Cao Cao stopped. “My plan was to defeat you all *without* killing you... Are you dissatisfied? To tell you the truth, the Holy Spear still requires further calibration. So I used this encounter to uncover more of its weaknesses.”

“Damn you, making light of us...”

“That goes both ways, wouldn’t you say, Vali? You love trivializing the abilities of others.” Cao Cao pointed to himself with his thumb. “Red Dragon Emperor Issei Hyoudou. I don’t care how many years it takes. Seek me out again once you’re ready. There are fewer than a dozen individuals I could hope to have the ultimate battle with using our Sacred Gears, and you and Vali are two of them. Throughout history, heroes have desired only to challenge Demon Kings and legendary dragons.”

—! Fine. No matter how huge the gulf between us is, I’ll definitely catch up to you one day!

Cao Cao turned to his ally. “Georg. Call the grim reapers. Hades wants the weakened Ophis... And can you imitate the exchange magic that Team Vali used earlier? Make me swap positions with Siegfried. He can handle the rest here.”

“I only saw it the once, so I don’t know if it will work. But I’ll try.”

“I would expect no less from the descendent of Professor Georg Faust, who made a pact with the legendary demon Mephistopheles.”

“My ancestor was too great. His name puts much pressure on my shoulders. But I understand, Cao Cao... And about that information we just received...” With a grim expression, Georg passed Cao Cao a piece of paper.

Cao Cao’s eyes narrowed as he read its contents. “...I see. So this is how the old Demon King regime repays us for helping them... Well, I expected as much. We’ve had enough of their cooperation anyhow.”

Did something happen? Judging by the atmosphere, the Hero Faction must have received some unexpected news. Following this exchange, Georg deployed another magic circle and teleported somewhere else.

“Georg has left the hotel,” Cao Cao said, turning to us. “He’s preparing the invocation to make me trade places with Siegfried.”

Transportation magic like what had swapped Vali and Fenrir? Georg is trying to reproduce Kuroka and Le Fay’s spell after seeing it only once?

“All right. Let’s play a game, Team Vali, Team Gremory. In short order, a band

of grim reapers will arrive here under orders from Hades to retrieve Ophis. My own comrade Siegfried will participate. The aim is to see whether you can all escape safely. There's no telling what will happen to Ophis if Hades gets his hands on her... Can you defend her and get away without dying? Give it your best shot. I'd prefer that the Heavenly Dragons survive, but I have no intention of risking myself or my comrades against those grim reapers. Indeed, I think it most appropriate to fight only those who can overcome crises like this."

With those parting words, Cao Cao left.

A game...? Is he screwing with us...?!

I could hardly contain my anger at how much this guy kept insulting us all!



"There are grim reapers in the parking lot—a considerable number of them," Kiba reported after returning to the hotel room, where the rest of us were waiting.

"That damn Hades! He's really turning against the rest of us?!" Azazel spat hatefully.

After the battle against Cao Cao, we injured members of the Gremory Familia, along with Irina, Azazel, Vali, Kuroka, Le Fay, and Ophis, made our way to the very center of the hotel in the alternative dimension.

There, on the thirtieth floor, we had Le Fay litter the ground with strong barriers. If we had asked her to, she could have placed shields throughout the building, but apparently one floor was the limit if we didn't want to risk weakening our defensive position.

We had the injured rest in another room on the same floor while they waited for Asia's help. Xenovia, Azazel, and I had already been restored to full health.

Kuroka's treatment was complete, but she was resting in a different room with Ravel and Koneko watching over her. Vali's wounds had been mended, but he was still in immense pain from Samael's curse and was recovering in his own room.

Le Fay had attempted to dispel the curse, but according to her, it was too powerful and couldn't be removed easily. The only thing to do was wait for it to

lift on its own. In the meantime, however, Vali's torment continued.

To think that someone as powerful as Vali had been reduced to such a state. Had it been me, I would probably have died.

Asia was taking a nap in an adjoining chamber, exhausted after using her healing powers so much. It was best she rested up now, while she could.

In the meantime, we needed a strategy for getting out of here.

According to Azazel, Georg had created this dimension through his Sacred Gear the Dimension Lost. In its Balance Breaker form, Dimension Create, it used mist to forge these unique planes. Something similar had happened back when Diodora kidnapped Asia.

This pocket dimension had re-creations of the parking lot and nearby scenery.

Apparently, the facsimiles of Kyoto, both that in Arashiyama and the second one centered on Nijo Castle, had been forged the same way. Unsurprisingly, it seemed to incorporate the same technology used to make battlefields in demon Rating Games. Frankly, it was incredible how the interior of the hotel rooms were copied so accurately. The beds felt just like the real thing. However, water didn't flow from the taps in the bathroom, and the refrigerators were all empty. Maybe there was a limit on the things that could be duplicated?

In the room where everyone who didn't need rest or medical attention was gathered, Le Fay let out a deep sigh. "I've received a message from headquarters. To put it simply, they're claiming that Team Vali attempted to overthrow Ophis through deception and seize control of her organization. The Hero Faction claims to have rescued her. Everyone has been ordered to terminate any surviving members of Team Vali on sight..."

Everyone was stunned by this news.

Seriously?! They're claiming that Vali fooled Ophis?! And that the Hero Faction saved her?! We have the real Ophis right here! Was that power they stole enough to produce a new Infinite Dragon? Maybe they don't need the original anymore? How cruel can those jerks be?!

"So that's how they're playing it. Now Team Vali is in the crosshairs for trying to help Ophis fulfill her wish. Talk about a mess," Azazel groaned.

Team Vali's members were now considered traitors to the Khaos Brigade, meaning they'd be on the run. I guess you could say it was comeuppance for always doing as they pleased. Still, I couldn't forgive what the Hero Faction did.

Le Fay hung her head. "We were researching the mysteries of the world, the Great Red included, and seeking out legendarily powerful people while occasionally working to grant Ophis's desires... Those heroes must have thought of us as an eyesore because we have special abilities and they don't. Siegfried is especially resentful toward us. He hated that my brother Arthur joined our group..."

I never knew there were such extreme tensions between the Khaos Brigade's different factions. If I remembered right, Arthur was part of the Hero Faction initially.

Did Team Vali steal him as part of its quest to gather strength?

"What do you mean by 'the mysteries of the world'?" I asked. "And these 'legendarily powerful people'? I don't get it."

Why on earth was Vali recruiting all these powerhouses?

"We started by looking into the secrets of the Great Red, who swims between dimensions, then investigated ruined civilizations like the continent of Mu and Atlantis, with its incredible technology. We even ventured to other worlds and had a look at Yggdrasil, the World Tree from Norse mythology. And searched everywhere for legendary champions and monsters, often with nothing more than old forgotten stories to go on. Occasionally, we did a little work for the Khaos Brigade, too."

"...You almost sound like adventurers."

"Yes! Every day is like a new adventure! And we wound up battling a lot of strong opponents. Vali hopes to discover where dragons came from, and the real reason why the Heavenly Dragons got into such a big fight that they had to be sealed away in Sacred Gears. We're hoping one lead might even take us to a new Longinus!" Le Fay explained joyously.

I take it back. They're not adventurers. They just have too much time on their hands! Vali's ultimate goal was to fight the Great Red, but beyond that, his crew

was just zipping around doing whatever they pleased! A world-spanning journey to punch the mightiest foes!

“I think Vali gets his sense of curiosity from the governor,” Le Fay added.

Azazel sighed at this, and his eyes narrowed. He looked almost like a father hearing of his son’s mischief.

Le Fay forced a smile. “By the way, Mister Governor. Longinuses have been popping up left and right lately, haven’t they? I was wondering if the vessel of the Canis Lycaon is with the Grigori right now?”

Azazel looked at the ceiling. “The Canis Lycaon, Slash Dog... He has another mission right now. He’s also a pain in the neck and doesn’t get along with Vali.”

“Yes, I’ve heard.” Le Fay chuckled.

Her cute smile helped soothe my nerves a little.

I decided to ask a bit of a random question. “Hey, Teach, if Cao Cao has the strongest Longinus, someone else has got to have the second-strongest one, right?”

“That would be Zenith Tempest. In order, the four most powerful are the True Longinus, the Zenith Tempest, the Annihilation Maker, and the Dimension Lost. We know the vessel of the Zenith Tempest—they’re firmly in Heaven’s camp. Irina, how’s the Brave Saint’s Joker doing?”

“You mean Dulio?” she asked. “Apparently, he’s wandering from place to place trying lots of delicious food...”

Azazel was left speechless by this answer. “He’s supposed to be a genius reincarnated angel, a potential future Seraph candidate, and he’s just lazing around?! *He’s* your team’s trump card?! What are Michael and the Seraphs thinking?!”

Irina looked troubled. “I—I don’t think I can answer that,” she muttered.

Azazel had hinted at that reincarnated angel Joker before. Undoubtedly, he’d been selected for a reason.

“Is this Dulio really that strong?”

My question was directed at Azazel, but it was Le Fay who replied. “Dulio’s one of the people Vali wants to fight the most. He’s the church’s strongest exorcist.”

The church’s strongest exorcist?!

He had to be quite the proficient fighter, then. Not only was he in possession of the second-mightiest Longinus, but he was also the best exorcist, a reincarnated angel, *and* a Joker... He certainly sounded formidable!

Xenovia, a Holy Sword wielder formerly affiliated with the church, offered, “Dulio Gesualdo is famous within the Christian faith. I never knew him personally, but as a human, he specialized in annihilating brutal monsters and high-ranking demons.”

He managed to take down high-class demons while he was still a human? That puts him at Cao Cao’s level. I guess that Longinus really sets him apart...

“Longinus users... There are thirteen Longinuses in total: the True Longinus, the Sephiroth Graal, the Boosted Gear, the Divine Dividing, the Regulus Nemea, the Innovate Clear, the Absolute Demise, the Dimension Lost, the Zenith Tempest, the Incinerate Anthem, the Annihilation Maker, the Canis Lycaon, and the Telos Karma. Make sure you remember those names, Issei.”

“O-okay!”

I would have to add them to my notes!

Thirteen in total. And I had personally encountered...around half of them. Just imagining the impossible abilities that the remaining ones possessed gave me the chills.

Seemingly filled with abrupt inspiration, Azazel stood.

Maybe he has a plan to get us out of here?

“Ah! I’ve realized what their users have in common... They’re all weirdos beyond comprehension! We’ve got a boob brain and a battle maniac here—and the others are just as selfish and bizarre, too! I’ll have to jot this down later! The bastards!”

Honestly, it’s my fault for even expecting something useful from him.

But Azazel wasn't finished. "And there's another thing you all have in common. The way you use those Longinuses differs from your predecessors. You all find innovative ways to increase your strength with them. It's as though each of you has exceeded our classification system. Unless..."

From there he fell into mumbling. There was no pulling him back when he got like this.

Or so I thought at first, but then an idea came to me, inspired by Ophis, who'd just returned to the room.

"I will take a look around this floor," she'd said earlier, not bothering to wait for any of us. And now she was back.

"How do you feel, Ophis?" Azazel questioned.

"Weakened. At present, I am only around twice as strong as the two Heavenly Dragons at their full might."

"Yeah...I guess you really have been drained then."

"Hold on, she's still twice as powerful as Ddraig and Albion before they were sealed away? And you're calling her weak? Just how strong was she before...?" If she was that incredible after the attack, what did my being a Heavenly Dragon even mean anymore?!

"Well, Ophis *is* the strongest entity among all the factions."

That was pretty obvious at this point! It was hard to comprehend just how overwhelming she was at her original strength. She hadn't so much as acknowledged Cao Cao as an opponent, after all.

"Hey, Ophis," I said. "There's something I want to ask you. Why did you intervene to save Asia and Irina?"

Georg's fireball had been directed at them, and Ophis had placed herself in its path to shield the two girls.

I still didn't get why. She was supposed to be uninterested in everything except Ddraig and the Great Red. It didn't make sense.

"She...gave me tea. And the other...played cards with me."

—*S-seriously? That stuff back at my house?*

“You mean back at my place?” I asked, making a dumb face.

Ophis nodded.

“Th-that’s all?”

She nodded again.

Maybe it was me but...Ophis didn’t sound like such a bad person.

“Thank you, Ophis!” Irina said with immense gratitude.

After hearing about Ophis’s condition, Azazel placed a hand on his chin. “Only about twice as strong as the two Heavenly Dragons... Odd. Cao Cao considered you almost totally spent. Maybe your remaining strength will be enough.”

I couldn’t disagree there. Siegfried and those grim reapers were out looking for us, and it was definitely encouraging to hear that Ophis still had that much power.

Expressionless, Ophis raised a hand into the air. “It is likely that Cao Cao did not notice. When Samael took my strength, I transformed much of it into serpents and let them escape to another dimension. I went to retrieve them. That is why I am now twice as strong as the two Heavenly Dragons.”

Ophis’s confession left us all stunned!

“*That’s* why you wanted to look around?! To gather all that power you hid?!” Azazel exclaimed, dumbfounded.

Ophis responded with a heavy nod.

Azazel chuckled. “Ha-ha-ha. That damned Cao Cao. He thought he took almost everything you had, but you managed to hide a large chunk in a separate dimension. After reclaiming it, you’re still twice as strong as Ddraig in his prime. Sorry, Hero Faction, you’ve underestimated your old boss.”

Ophis created a black serpent around the tip of her finger. “This is how I transformed my energy. I sent the serpents away, and I recovered them. However, I cannot leave this place. There is something I must capture.”

What a trick!

Azazel stopped laughing and sighed. “Well, those grim reapers wouldn’t be here if they thought you could beat them. You’re not infinite anymore, Ophis. You’re limited. They must have other ways to limit your abilities beyond Samael. We’ll still need to take great caution.” He turned to Team Vali’s mage. “Le Fay, you’re good at spatial magic, right? Like what Kuroka uses? Is there some way to bring in help from the outside? Or to let a small group of us out?”

“There is... But with Kuroka out of action, there’s a limit to what I can do alone. I do know spells that could help some of us escape... But I could only take two with me at most. After switching Vali and Fenrir, the barrier sealing this dimension has been tightened. I doubt the same technique would work twice. Georg seemed to understand the spell, so at best, I’ve got one more transportation before we’re sealed in completely.”

So at best, two of us could get out with Le Fay. And we’d have only one chance at it.

“Are we going to help Ophis flee and fight the grim reapers ourselves?” I inquired.

Azazel shook his head. “That would be impossible. Given what Ophis said earlier, this entire artificial dimension seems designed to cage her in. I’d love to know that was accomplished, but for the time being, it’s reasonable that limit extends only to her. We need to find some way to destroy and flee together. Those grim reapers are more dangerous than you think. You’re probably stronger than they are, but those sickles are capable of some nasty stuff. They drain your life force with every wound. Your life force is still recovering, Issei. A single hit could prove fatal. And Ophis is diminished. If she’s attacked, she’ll continue to weaken. We have to protect her at all costs. If they manage to drain any more of her strength, our problem will increase exponentially. Especially seeing as we’re up against Hades.”

Basically, we had to keep Ophis away from our enemies.

I also needed to watch out for those grim reaper scythes. Those things could kill me... I don’t know why, but today sure was full of lethal threats! It was horrible! I’d already had enough stress with the middle-class demon promotion exam!

“We’d better choose a few people to leave and get help,” Azazel decided. “Irina, you go on ahead. Tell Sirzechs and Heaven what the Hero Faction’s up to, and about Hades’s betrayal.”

“B-but! I think Ravel should go first!” Irina protested.

Azazel’s gaze turned serious. “Ravel said that we don’t need to prioritize her escape. Listen, there’s no perfect-win scenario here. Our enemies want to kill Ophis, Vali, and Issei. If Hades claims Ophis’s powers, there’s no telling what he could do!”

Irina seemed like she wanted to say more, but she swallowed her words and nodded.

She was a good friend, one who cared about her allies. However, she also recognized her position and role.

Azazel then faced Xenovia. “Take Xenovia here as your escort. Ex-Durendal’s broken, but she should still be able to wield the base Durendal. There’s a possibility one of those damned heroes or a grim reaper might be waiting outside the barrier, after all.”

“The responsibility falls to me, huh?” Xenovia narrowed her eyes with clear determination.

As Azazel said, Ex-Durendal had been destroyed. The Excaliburs used to forge its scabbard were ruined, leaving only the original Holy Sword. There was also fine damage to Durendal’s blade. Cao Cao was something else entirely to have effortlessly smashed such a legendary weapon.

Xenovia wouldn’t be able to fight at her full strength. She understood that better than anyone, and the raw frustration showed on her face.

“Protecting people of value is a critical responsibility... Besides, it’s about time that Heaven brings its research to a head. You know what I mean. See what you can do to sway them. And get the Durendal repaired while you’re at it. We’ll help you get out of here. Something tells me a single battle won’t decide things anyway, so fix that thing and hurry back.”

Xenovia nodded at Azazel’s instruction.

And so it was decided that Le Fay, Xenovia, and Irina would teleport out of the artificial dimension to inform our allies of the dire situation.

Le Fay moved to another room to create the magic circle. Apparently, she needed to incorporate specifics relating to both Xenovia and Irina into the formula for it to work.

Before leaving, she handed Irina a sheathed sword.

“I-is this?!” Irina exclaimed in shock.

Le Fay smiled. It was the final Excalibur, the one belonging to Arthur Pendragon—Excalibur Ruler.

“Please, take this. My brother entrusted it to me. I couldn’t find the right time to give it to you, but I don’t think there’s a better chance than now. It’s already served its purpose for us.”

“Are you sure?” Xenovia asked.

Le Fay nodded. “We have Fenrir. We had to diminish his overall power to control him, but there’s still no greater monster... Why not use Excalibur Ruler to repair Durendal? I don’t mind.”

Irina bowed her head. “Th-thank you, Le Fay! I thought all you people descended from heroes were scary, but some of you are kind!”

“Ha-ha-ha, I’m honored. However, people *do* call me a weirdo just like my brother, you know.” Le Fay grinned as she, Xenovia, and Irina left to construct the teleportation array.

This meant they could build an Ex-Durendal using all seven of the Excaliburs! Previously, it only incorporated six! I couldn’t imagine what it would be capable of when complete!

Azazel clapped a hand against his knee. “Now then, Rias. We need to devise a strategy. The goal is to extract Ophis safely and make sure no one else dies.”

“Yes, of course.”

Our two tacticians exchanged fearless grins. It was time to start thinking about our next move.

Yep, we would definitely get everyone out of here in one piece!



While Rias, Azazel, and Akeno were devising our next strategy, I made my way to Kuroka's room to see how she was doing.

Her injuries were healed, but she was still in bed. According to Le Fay, Kuroka had been on the lookout against assailants during Ophis's stay at the Hyoudou Residence, and as a result, she was mentally and physically exhausted.

That was probably why her energy was even more depleted than expected. Her injuries were mended, but she was far from well. Ravel was watching over her for now.

Ravel, our guest, should have been one of the first to escape. Yet she stubbornly chose to remain behind out of worry for Koneko and Kuroka.

"I'm of the immortal House of Phenex. I'm not about to die *that* easily," she'd insisted.

As a result, Xenovia and Irina were able to leave instead.

Ravel was tough. Perhaps that was a given for a family of immortals. It was all the more reason we had to protect her.

"How are you feeling?" I asked as I approached the bed.

Kuroka's lips curled in a mischievous grin. "Oh, Red Dragon Emperor? How kind of you to come and see me, *meow*."

"Well, you did save Koneko."

"Only by chance, *meow*."

Only by chance? She was literally screaming her sister's name.

She had thrown herself in harm's way to save Koneko from danger.

Koneko was next to the bed, sitting on a chair with her head lowered. "Why?" she whispered. Then she stood and shouted, "Why did you save me?! I'm just a tool as far as you're concerned!"

"I don't really understand it myself, *meow*."

"Don't make fun of me...! You left me behind, and ever since, people have

said horrible things about me... Then you tried to take me away by force during the party in the underworld...”

Koneko, normally so quiet, was now crying out, releasing all the feelings that had built inside her.

“I don’t understand you!” she exclaimed before darting from the room.

“Koneko!” I called. I would have followed after, but Kuroka tugged on my arm.

“Don’t worry. I’ll go after her,” Ravel said.

Ravel helped with so many things I should’ve done myself, but she was the best one for this. She and Koneko were in the same class at school, after all.

So I sat myself on the chair by the bed. “Hey, Kuroka. What happened with your previous master?”

“Nothing much. I killed him because he was such a scumbag. That’s all, *meow*,” she stated, her typical smile melting into something more serious. “He took too much interest in *nekoshou* powers... Our powers. He became a nuisance. Shirone wouldn’t have been able to refuse him back then, and if he’d ordered her to use sage arts, it would have driven her berserk... That girl’s too kind.”

Kuroka paused, and I saw kindness in her eyes. “Anyway, he was obsessed with improving his Familia members’ abilities, even forcing them to extremes. He forgot those were flesh-and-blood people, *meow*.”

Kuroka had become a wanted criminal for slaying her master.

“You did it to protect Koneko? And you tried to take her from us to keep her from other dangerous individuals and factions that would be drawn by my Red Dragon Emperor power?”

Kuroka had committed evil deeds, and she was terribly mischievous. Yet after spending the past few days with her, I’d started to suspect there was more to her than that.

She giggled lightly. “I like pranks, you know. I love using my powers. And having fun. I’m a stray cat, *meow*. I’d rather live free wandering the world with friends I meet along the way. However, Shirone’s different. She’s more of a

domestic cat. That's why, Red Dragon Emperor..." Kuroka stared straight into my eyes. "I don't care what kind of danger you attract; I just want you to be a stupidly straightforward Heavenly Dragon like Vali is. If you can do that, you'll make her crazy happy."

Kuroka was a wild feline, the bad cat of Team Vali, and there was no changing that. Occasionally, she even ran rampant with her sage arts. And she was always up for a good fight.

But she still loved her little sister.

"...You're even clumsier than I am," I said with a bitter grin.

Kuroka made an awkward face and looked away. "I don't want to hear that from a crazy power maniac, *meow*. Sure I'm bedridden now, but I'm still a proper Wizard-type fighter who needed two Bishop pieces to be recruited. This conversation is over. I'm going to sleep, *meow*. Or do you want to try making a baby with me? What a terrible Heavenly Dragon you are, trying to take an injured woman by force!"

"I'd be glad to try! Wait, no! I'm an idiot! Get some rest. This is no time for that."

Kuroka had to regain her strength for the coming battle. Her abilities would be incredibly useful if we had to retreat.

I rose from my chair to leave the room, when—

"...Thanks, Red Dragon Emperor."

When I glanced over my shoulder, Kuroka was feigning sleep, acting as though she hadn't said anything.

Having checked in on Kuroka, I made my way to *his* room.

Vali was sitting upright in bed when I entered. Asia had healed his injuries, but he still looked awful. His breath was labored, and I could tell he was in serious pain.

Samael's curse was definitely still running its course. I'd never seen Vali so pale. Honestly, it was pretty upsetting.

"I never thought you'd take so much damage from a single blow," I remarked.

Vali forced a grin. “I gave a pretty poor show, huh? I came here to beat Cao Cao, and now look at me.”

“That’s just proof of how incredible Samael’s curse is. I never imagined anything could beat you that easily.”

There was nothing we could’ve done. Vali was basically an accumulation of raw power, and he’d been downed in one hit. I wouldn’t be forgetting that anytime soon.

Cao Cao used Samael for a reason, and the only one I could think of was to keep Vali from activating his Juggernaut Drive.

“Are you hoping to curry favor with me?” Vali asked.

“As I continue to grow stronger, I’m always reminded of how incredible you are. It’s beyond frustrating that I haven’t managed to catch up yet.”

“I’m looking forward to when you do, so don’t take too long.”

“You’re always so full of yourself. Anyway, did you find that power you mentioned, the one better than a Juggernaut Drive?”

“And if I did?”

“Then I’d be relieved. Failing to score a blow on Cao Cao... It really wasn’t like you,” I said.

“I guess not,” Vali replied with a curt nod. “He protected Georg and Samael and sealed Ophis’s power away without resorting to any flashy attacks. And he did it all himself without killing us. He achieved all of those difficult conditions using the fewest attacks possible. Sure, he relied on Samael this time, but it’s easy to see how strong he is. Cao Cao may be human, but he’s the leader of a group that’s more than ready to take on supernatural beings.”

I definitely understood that much. Cao Cao outmatched Azazel and Vali, and he blocked everything that we members of the Gremory Familia threw at him; from magic, to demonic attacks, to combination moves.

I managed to hit him with my Triaina in Kyoto, but I was worthless today. Damn, it was frustrating! I clenched my fists.

“The Hero Faction observes its foes carefully, researching weaknesses and

blind spots. On top of that, its members explore the traits and characteristics of our weapons, too. And at the center of it all is Cao Cao, a man armed with the Holy Spear. Remember his Balance Breaker well. It's a variant-type, one pushed to extremes through his experimentation to reach a point where he can challenge supernatural beings by himself."

"He has that Truth Idea thing, too, right? Just how strong is he...?"

"His Truth Idea is extremely close in nature to our Juggernaut Drives. Although it's worlds apart in other ways. Using it will grant him incredible power, but he'll go berserk. I don't think he can control it. He lacks the magical aptitude..."

Cao Cao had nearly used it against me in Kyoto. I had to wonder why. Was it because he was pissed that I'd beaten him, or did he actually have a way of managing it?

"You and I have better defenses than Cao Cao. His magical abilities aren't all that remarkable, either. If our attacks hit him, he'll go down. The problem is his techniques. He knows better than anyone how *human* he is, complete with all the limitations. In Rating Games, he'd likely be branded the ultimate Technique-type fighter. Still, he can unleash tremendous amounts of energy from his spear to completely annihilate everything around him."

The ultimate Technique-type fighter... Abilities honed to target his opponents' weaknesses, attacks formulated after in-depth research of his foes. My Triaina Rook severely wounded Cao Cao in Kyoto—a direct hit would've killed him. The same went for today.

However, Cao Cao was fully aware of my abilities and made sure that I never touched him. In a way, he was the exact opposite of Sairaorg.

He gave me the creeps. I just couldn't understand him... That was Cao Cao, an incomprehensible guy.

Oh, right. There's that thing I wanted to confirm.

"Hey, Vali? Why did you send Ophis to stay with us? Weren't you just using her?"

"Me?" he asked. "Ophis?"

Judging by that reaction, my guess was way off the mark. Was he really telling the truth, though?

Vali had used Ophis as bait to lure out Cao Cao and his companions. Yet he'd also concocted a plan that kept Ophis's desires in mind, and he'd tried to free her from Samael's attack. If he was only after Cao Cao, he could have left her to her fate and focused on fighting.

"I was just a conversation partner for her. She seemed lonely at times... No, forget it. I've said too much."

"Forget it," huh? Guess we can leave it there, then. I understood what he meant about Ophis seeming lonely, though. She'd acted to save Asia and Irina, the two who'd spent time with her. For that alone, I was willing to guard Ophis with my life. That much I could say with certainty.

"Ophis is the bad guy leader," I said. "Well, she *was* anyway. Regardless, I'll make sure she gets out of here."

"It's pretty obvious this won't end well if Hades gets his hands on her."

"I need to go help with the escape operation. Are you going to rest here, Vali?" I asked sarcastically.

He flashed me a dauntless grin. "I want to, but I'm the White Dragon Emperor. My body might be cursed, but I'm not about to back down to some damned grim reapers. Staying put is never an option for me."

I guess his pride trumped the pain. It was a relief to hear him mouthing off like he usually did.

Yeah, we could fight. Everything was ready.

"Vali, I promise we'll settle things one day. One of my goals is to beat you."

"Yeah. I'm looking forward to it, Issei Hyoudou. We can't die here."

The time for our escape drew near...

Life.4

As a Heavenly Dragon

I stared out the hotel room window at a bunch of creepy figures dressed in jet-black robes looking up at us.

I couldn't make out the shadowed faces beneath the hoods. Only their eyes glimmered in the darkness, filled with hostility and murderous intent.

Each one carried a huge, tasteless scythe in their hands, decorated with skulls and monster hands. That made it clear at first glance that we were dealing with villains.

Grim reapers, huh? Attendants of Hades, that good-for-nothing skeleton god, right? They came here to attack us?

Hades was clearly going too far... Why had he launched this assault?

The time for considering the politics of it was later. Our priority was getting out.

Apparently, there were only three ways to escape this artificial space that Georg made.

As Azazel explained: "Our three options are as follows. First, the creator of this plane, Georg, could undo it himself. That was what happened in Kyoto. The second would be to force an exit, though as explained earlier, that's impossible for all but particularly capable mages. Even Le Fay could only take two others out with her, and that was a trick that won't work twice. Georg has undoubtedly strengthened the barrier around this dimension by now."

There weren't many of us left behind to meet the force of grim reapers. As Azazel noted earlier, our plan hinged on sending Irina and Xenovia to get help.

As for the third method...

"The last one is the simplest and most straightforward, either defeat the

caster or destroy the barrier's focal point. Issei found and destroyed a separate barrier device back when Asia was kidnapped. We should search for a similar object this time."

Now that was easy to grasp! Basically, we just had to smash the thing powering the field keeping us locked in, and the entire artificial dimension would collapse!

The problem was finding that object. When Asia was taken captive, she was harnessed to the device, and the moment I destroyed it, the entire field crumbled.

Kuroka and Le Fay were already using their respective sage arts and magic to locate the machine.

They'd placed a map of the hotel on the floor and put little pieces marked with symbols resembling people or animals atop it. Those objects then folded like paper into small cranes. These were "eyes" meant to see things beyond our floor of the hotel, I guess.

With that part done, Le Fay added some magic symbols, chanted a weird spell, and spread around some odd ashes to complete the technique.

I didn't understand one bit, but Rias and Akeno watched with keen interest...

Her eyes squeezed shut, Le Fay raised a hand to the map, and the cranes rattled in response, symbols lighting up while the ashes moved on their own to make eerie patterns.

"There's one in the parking lot, another on the roof of the building, and one in the hall on the second floor," she said. "I've confirmed a total of three devices responsible for maintaining the barrier. And they're all shaped like snakes. No, like an ouroboros biting its own tail."

Le Fay handed Azazel a drawing that depicted a statue of a serpent biting its tail to make a ring.

"So each barrier device we need to destroy is shaped like an ouroboros. And there's three of them. I guess they did design this plane hoping to seal away Ophis. If she was her usual self, they wouldn't have had a chance in hell of containing her. So they built this dimension hoping they'd weaken her. All right,

Le Fay, what do we need to know about the objects maintaining this space? What about the grim reapers?”

“There are grim reapers at all three of the statues. Honestly, they already occupy the hall of every floor except this one. Most of them are gathered at the device in the parking lot, though. Cao Cao’s gone, of course, but now Siegfried is here to replace him. And Georg is in the parking lot, too.”

“That statue outside the hotel must be the most important of the three. Destroying it as quickly as possible would be best...,” said Rias. “Azazel, let’s enact the strategy we discussed earlier.”

Azazel nodded. “Sure. I’ve got to hand it to you, you’re a first-rate tactician. Issei fell for a woman who really gets him,” he replied, grinning.

Rias looked confident.

Huh? Do they want me to do something? I thought we were going to split up into two groups, one heading upward, the other down, both engaging the enemy forces before rendezvousing in the parking lot. And yet...

“Actually...,” Akeno began to whisper in my ear.

Hmm. Oh?

And so, the truth of Rias’s strategy was revealed to me.

...

Wh-what...?!

“That’s insane!” I cried to the heavens.

It was amazing! To have devised a plan like that on the spur of the moment. It used me expertly!

I never would’ve thought of that! B-but I can do it! Probably! Wow! I really did fall in love with the most amazing woman!

I eyed Rias with newfound respect, and Azazel placed a hand on my shoulder. “Well, it certainly is impressive,” he said. “But she only got this idea because she’s crazy about you. She’s taking a completely different strategy than Sona might have.”

It was still incredible, though! I should have expected nothing less from Rias Gremory! The person I most wanted to marry was definitely my number one!

“Now then, everyone, gather close.” Rias assembled us in the center of the room. With all eyes on her, she said, “Now, my dearest servants. Let’s break out of here. Our strategy is as follows...”

So began our great escape!

I stood at one far side of the hall protected by Le Fay’s magic. Koneko was with me, her cat ears revealed. She sat on her knees with her eyes closed in concentration.

Le Fay, Irina, and Xenovia were preparing their teleportation circle in a nearby room. The door was open, and the other members of the team were waiting by the window. Kuroka, whose physical strength had yet to return, and Vali, still afflicted by Samael’s curse, were also there. They’d all moved to the room on our floor with the best vantage point after Rias explained the plan.

The barrier protecting this floor wouldn’t last much longer. The grim reapers were already working on breaking it apart from the emergency stairwell and outside by the windows. Outside, the windows weren’t much better. Grim reapers waited just beyond the pane, which was presently covered by a curtain. They twirled their scythes in anticipation.

Trapped as we were, our only option was to make the first move.

I wasted no time activating my Balance Breaker and donning my armor. The plan would kick into action as soon as Le Fay’s magic circle was ready.

Koneko was busy trying to detect a certain presence. She stood abruptly and pointed to a spot on the ceiling and another on the floor. “Issei. Here and there.”

I nodded. “Got it.”

Koneko’s job was finished for now, so she would join the others.

I tugged at her hand before she left, however.

She had all but run from Kuroka’s room earlier. Perhaps she’d fought with Ravel, who’d gone after her, because she looked refreshed when she returned.

It was fortunate that Ravel was with us. Friends you could disagree with were important. I wanted to say my piece to Koneko as well.

“Look, I know Kuroka can be pretty bad. She’s power hungry and obsessed with sage arts, and she even joined a terrorist organization. I’m not going to argue that she’s good...but...” I peered down the corridor in the older sister’s direction.

Kuroka remained in the room, not noticing and popping her head out.

“But she *is* your sister. She’s a stray cat, a nasty one at times, and she always gets into trouble, but she’s your family.”

“...I’ve suffered because of her.”

The demon world was harsh to those who murdered their masters and became strays, regardless of their reasons. That extended to the relatives of those criminals, too. Koneko had been forced to shoulder the blame for her sister’s actions, and the consequences broke her heart... It must have been excruciating.

Koneko’s gaze was firm. “I hate her... I do... But she did save me earlier. I’ll trust her for today. Until we get out of here at least.”

That was surprising to hear.

Evidently, Koneko didn’t need any encouragement. This girl was growing strong. She looked ahead on her own to find her answers.

“That’s enough. If Kuroka does anything weird, tell me. I’ll make sure she’s punished,” I said, patting Koneko on the head.

She wrapped her arms around me in a hug. “You helped me improve. And you did the same for Gapser. Still, I want to keep getting stronger...”

“You can do it. Heck, I did it, so I’m sure you will, too. Probably faster than me.”

“I love you, Issei... Even if the president, Asia, and Akeno come before me, I want to chase after you... So...” Koneko paused to look me straight in the eyes. “When I get bigger, please marry me.”

““““““What?! A reverse proposal?!““““““ Rias, Asia, Akeno, Xenovia, Irina, and

Ravel all exclaimed before I had the chance to register my own astonishment.

Heeeey! Have they been listening to us this whole time?! Hold on, marry her?! Marry?!

Who would've expected Koneko to suggest that to me? I'd come to recognize her feelings for me—after all, she did to comfort me before the fight with Sairaorg—yet this was a shock nonetheless.

What an upset! I was moved! I had to show her how moved I was!

“Once you're taller and your breasts are bigger...I'd be delighted!” I managed, all but wringing the words from my throat because of how difficult they were to get out.

Ahhhhhhhhhhhh! Koneko said something so important, and I can't even reply with a decent line!

Grow taller and get bigger breasts! That was pretty much sexual harassment!

A wave of acute regret washed over me, but Koneko bobbed her head firmly. “I understand. I'll drink lots of milk. Please wait for me, Issei. I'll develop breasts even bigger than the others if it will help me become your wife.”

Despite my blunder, Koneko seemed fired up.

I-is this okay? H-hmm. Did I come out looking all right? I had no idea!

“The preparations are complete,” Le Fay announced.

A burst of light ran under her feet, expanding to encompass Irina and Xenovia and forming a magic array.

It was formed not with demon script, but a mage one. With it, the three girls would be able to make their escape from this pocket dimension.

Unfortunately, the Hero Faction probably had a squad waiting for anyone who got out. We trusted that Le Fay would be able to get her group to safety, though.

Koneko joined the others by the window. It was time for the operation to commence.

I shot a look down the hallway to Rias, and she answered with a nod.

That was the signal. It was time for me to Promote to my Triaina Bishop!

“I’m Promoting to my Welsh Blaster Bishop!”

“Change: Fang Blast!”

A red aura gathered around my back, forming into a backpack with a pair of cannons.

Artillery on both shoulders! I aimed one up and the other down—the way Rias instructed earlier. Just as she suspected, I was able to move the barrels independently of each other.

Koneko had used her sage arts to locate the grim reapers on the roof and in the hall on the second floor. Those were the two locations she’d indicated to me earlier.

“Let’s go!” I called out to my allies.

Our plan was to fire my Bishop Triaina cannons at both targets simultaneously.

The three barrier-maintaining devices were located on the rooftop, the second-floor hall, and the parking lot. Splitting up to destroy the first two and then reconvening in the parking lot for the third one would take too long and give our foes time to counter our strategy.

Instead, we intended to annihilate the first two statues immediately! If I blasted the two locations inside the hotel, we could take out the grim reapers there along with the devices!

“All right. Let’s do this, Ddraig! We’re aiming for the devices keeping us locked in this artificial plane, along with all the grim reapers guarding them! Let’s take them out all at once!”

“Yeah!”

Vrrrrrrrrnnnn...

My backpack rumbled to life, power gathering in the two barrels!

The right one was aimed for the ceiling, the left one for the floor! There was no need to worry about range. The blasts would be powerful enough to punch

straight through the building!

“Let’s gooooo! Dragon Blaaaaasteeeeerrrrrr!”

Boooooooooooooooooooooom!

A huge amount of red energy exploded from cannons—two straight lines piercing above and below!

Aura bombardment aimed at the room and the hall! The onslaught from my Dragon Blaster shook the entire hotel.

Once I was finished letting loose, I looked first up, then down.

Both the ceiling and the floor had gaping holes!

With her eyes closed, Le Fay announced, “The barrier-maintaining devices on the roof and the floor below have been destroyed! And the grim reapers guarding them have been dispatched! Only the device in the parking lot remains! We’re ready to make the jump out of here as well!”

The teleportation square beneath Le Fay, Xenovia, and Irina shone bright.

“Xenovia! Irina! Good luck!” I shouted to them as they vanished.

“Issei! Don’t die!”

“We’ll get word to Heaven and the Demon Kings! I promise!”

They disappeared not a moment after giving their replies. It seemed they'd successfully escaped!

“Okay! Now all that’s left is to defeat the rest of ’em and smash that last device! Let’s go, everyone!” Azazel shouted. A swipe of his spear of light destroyed the large window at the end of the room!

""""""""""Yeah!"""""""" everyone responded in turn.

Azazel, Rias, Akeno, and Kiba led the charge, jumping through the broken window, wings spread wide! Ahead of them was an army of grim reapers in the parking lot!

Those hooded creeps launched into the air with their scythes raised! It was a really freaky sight! The two sides met in midair!

Georg, the architect of this artificial space, must have realized that Le Fay, Xenovia, and Irina had found an exit, because he quickly strengthened the barrier around it. No one would be getting out that way again.

He could do whatever he wanted; all we had to do was break the last device, and we'd be home free!

Vali, Kuroka, Asia, Koneko, Ravel, and I remained in the room. Kuroka had created a sturdy defensive magic circle to shield the members of the rearguard. She couldn't protect an entire floor like Le Fay, but this was enough. Grim reapers tried to get in, but maybe they realized it would take too much time to break through, because they gave up and chased Azazel's group instead. Everything was going as we'd planned.

"I'll heal everyone's wounds!"

Asia was responsible for healing anyone wounded. She'd developed her abilities to the point that she could fashion her aura into a bow and arrow to fire off healing shots with great accuracy. If one of those healing arrows happened to approach an enemy, she would make it disperse. Her powers affected friends and enemies alike, so that was an essential component of her technique. Yep, she really was exceptional!

Koneko and Ravel had remained behind specifically to help Kuroka, who was still recovering.

"Oh, Shirone...? You're lending me a hand?"

"...I'm just repaying my debt for your earlier assistance. Concentrate on your defensive barrier, please. I'll support you with sage magic."

"And why are *you* helping me, young lady? *Meow?*"

Ravel's face turned pink at this question, and she immediately started pouting. "I—I just feel like it! You should be grateful!"

Kuroka broke into a smile. "Oh? Then by all means...Shirone, how about I teach some *nekomata* sorcery next time in addition to sage magic? Only if you want to, though," she said half-jokingly.

Koneko apparently took the offer quite seriously. "...Yes, please. I want to

become strong to support my friends. If I can push forward, then I'll do it, even if it means relying on you..."

She wanted to move beyond her limits like the others. It might not lead to her reconciling with her sister, but if it helped her grow, perhaps that was enough. And Ravel would be by her side from now on. Once Gasper returned, our first-year trio would be complete. I was looking forward to it!

As for Vali, the last remaining member of our rearguard...

"I might not have access to my Balance Breaker for the moment, but take this!"

Boom!

He unleashed a huge blast of demonic energy from the palms of his hands, taking out several airborne grim reapers! Not even a curse could slow him down! And he continued to fire more volleys, scattering the grim reapers!

"Me too."

Ophis was also supporting us from the back lines! With this dragon, the strongest entity in existence, lending a hand, our escape operation was bound to succeed.

Shing!

Light gathered around her hands, and...

Booooooooooooooooooooooooooom!

...a tremendous roar shook the air. The explosion swallowed the parking lot and my friends!

Thankfully, Rias, Kiba, and Akeno emerged safely from the smoke!

W-whoa! What awesome power! She better hold back a bit or we'll all die!

Just as I was about to complain to Ophis, she tilted her head to one side and looked at her hands.

"...Strange. It is hard to hold back."

—! Wh-whaaaaat?! She just blasted everything without being able to control the attack?!

It was too dangerous! Far too dangerous! With a rearguard like that, we'd never be able to focus on the fight before us! There was no telling what could happen in this battle. Our own allies were a danger to us! Ophis's powers were just too unstable! Was she a literal mass of anxiety or something?!

With a flap of his wings, Azazel flew back toward the hotel. "Hey, Ophis! You don't have to fight! Samael seems to have disrupted your energy, making it difficult to use properly! If you go all out recklessly, you'll annihilate our side, too! *We'll* find a way out!" he declared before returning to the battlefield.

Ophis nodded and took a seat.

The Ouroboros Dragon was surprisingly docile. And speaking of dragons, it was time I joined the battle!

I stood at the window, aiming my shoulder cannons into the parking lot. Usually I was no good at aiding others in a fight, but this was a kind of help I could manage—power-type support!

I leveled the barrels at the grim reapers below...

There was no need to hold back this time! I would blow them all away, grim reapers and parking lot alike!

"One more time! Dragon Blasteeeeerrrrr!"

Booooooooooom!

An enormous stream of red power sped from the shoulder-mounted cannons, enveloping everything...



Crack! Creak!

The artificial dimension groaned under the stress. My Dragon Blaster and Ophis's unsteady strength had dealt tremendous damage to the ground, buildings, and the plane itself.

That the barrier remained could only mean that the device was still operational—a true testament to Georg's abilities.

After being struck by all the strength of my Triaina Bishop, the parking lot was a wasteland. The ground was shattered, leaving no good place to stand. A huge

cloud of dust and dirt hung in the air. It was a good thing I was equipped in armor!

I jumped down to the ruined battlefield. Rias and the others were still engaged with the grim reapers.

Kiba cleaved through them at high speed, while Azazel obliterated several at once with his giant spear of light.

The two were magnificent—they fought with no wasted effort whatsoever as they struck down our enemies.

“Holy Lightning!”

Akeno unleashed a huge surge of electricity from her fingers, blasting a horde of grim reapers and wiping them out!

“I’ll destroy you!”

Rias was likewise hurling shots of destructive power to annihilate grim reapers and the surviving scenery. As I watched, I realized that this kind of battle was perfect for my Two Great Ladies. It enabled them to utilize their full potential. Akeno’s Holy Lightning and Rias’s power of destruction wrought havoc over large areas. So long as their foes weren’t strong enough to endure the attacks, they would triumph.

The members of our vanguard dodged the incoming scythes expertly. A single hit would reduce their life forces considerably! Evasion was a top priority if we hoped to win.

“A low-level grim reaper is mightier than an average middle-class demon,” Ddraig said.

Gotcha. In that case, just about any of us should be able to tear through them with ease. We can crush them in droves!

As soon as Rias and Akeno saw me, they came soaring over.

“Issei! Raise your strength before transferring it! I’ll send them flying in one blast!”

“Same here!”

“Got it!” I acknowledged, placing my hands on my shoulders as I charged the dragon power within me! I was going to transfer my strength to both of them simultaneously!

“Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost!”

“Transfer!”

My energy flowed through to the two of them, their auras both swelling! With this, they were both significantly powered up!

Rias and Akeno both leaped high into the air, unleashing destructive spheres and lightning strikes on the grim reapers! A whirlpool of destruction and of brilliant electricity flooded the sky above!

Whoa! No way! It was hard to imagine anyone could survive that! They would probably manage to slaughter the remaining enemies by themselves.

“Well, your Dragon Blast and Ophis’s attack already destroyed a fair number of them... Still, those two girls always had great potential, and after transferring the Red Dragon Emperor’s powers to them...”

My Dragon Blaster was the best tool for taking out the small fries. However, after those shots and boosting Akeno and Rias, I was exhausted. My energy was drained.

In my current state, I would be in a bind if the others couldn’t handle the rest.

“Yo. Long time no see, Red Dragon Emperor.”

Someone called out to me from overhead—a tall, slender man equipped with several magical swords. It was that bastard from Kyoto.

“Oh, it’s Mr. Hero. Siegfried, right? Are you here to fight me?” I replied.

“That does sound like an amusing idea. I’m sure we’d have a great contest,” Siegfried said with a shrug. “Unfortunately, I need you to finish off these guys first.”

A new group of grim reapers appeared around him soundlessly. Compared to those that the others were fighting, this batch was equipped with more elaborate robes and scythes... Their auras appeared more dangerous as well.

He wants me to fight some more lackeys first?

“I really can’t afford to get hit by any of them. Nothing to it but to evade, I guess.” I straightened up and prepared myself for a fight!

Scythes came rushing at me, but I was used to quick movements thanks to my training with Kiba!

I dodged effortlessly and fired a Dragon Shot in retaliation!

Boom!

The grim reapers were scattered!

All right! My Dragon Shots should take them down easily!

The reapers came at me in ever greater numbers, and I moved into a flurry of punches and kicks, knocking them down.

This was easy. Compared to Sairaorg and Cao Cao, the reapers were a piece of cake.

Siegfried looked astonished as he observed. “—! They’re supposed to be mid-level grim reapers! How is he beating them back?!”

Th-they are?

Honestly, I was just as surprised as Siegfried. The reapers didn’t pose much of a threat. It was easy to read their attacks, and even when they attempted something unexpected, it didn’t come at me so fast that I couldn’t respond. Their movements were always simple to avoid.

Others tried to throw magic-based attacks my way, but I repelled them with my fists just as Sairaorg did.

“Impressive. And your regular Balance Breaker was already plenty strong.”

“I still wasn’t able to get through Cao Cao’s defenses, though,” I admitted.

Siegfried broke into a wry grin. “He’s special. Don’t worry about him. You’re plenty capable enough as is.”

That might have been a compliment, but it didn’t feel like one.

Before the battle, I’d asked Aazazel what I’d need to do to beat Cao Cao.

That spear-wielding bastard possessed an in-depth understanding of my abilities and Sacred Gear.

“...In a sense, you’re already stronger than he is. If you manage to land an attack, that is... But it doesn’t feel like you *can* hit him, does it? Yeah... Your best bet is probably to use a special move on him, like you did back in Kyoto. Of course, it would have to be something that can beat those crazy abilities he’s got.”

Evidently, I’d need a technique that could beat an opponent even Vali thought of as overwhelming. That sounded pretty unfair to me!

Ugh. Where are all these absurdly overpowered enemies coming from?! I was a regular high school kid not that long ago!

It was enough to bring a guy to tears!

“I thought I told you that you’re already extremely powerful.”

Fwoosh...

Azazel alighted beside me, perhaps having sensed what I was thinking. “Grim reapers won’t be much challenge after facing the likes of Sairaorg and Cao Cao. The same goes for me, too, technically,” he added confidently, pointing to his own face.

Right, Teach was super strong as well, even if Cao Cao had beaten him! That Hero jerk was on a whole different level, probably because of all his snooping on us.

“It won’t do to have my grim reapers made such light of.”

A mysterious voice reverberated throughout the parking lot.

I looked all around for the speaker and found something emerging from a spatial distortion. It was...another robed grim reaper. Honestly, I wasn’t sure of that initially.

His face was more of a mask, the sort you might see a clown wear. The scythe he carried exuded a terrible, jet-black power that surpassed the other grim reapers.

I could tell just by looking that this was a high-level grim reaper—a boss-class

one, in fact.

“You...!” Azazel exclaimed in shock.

“Greetings, governor of the fallen angels,” the grim reaper said with a bow. “I am Lord Hades’s attendant, Pluto.”

“...! Pluto, the highest-ranking grim reaper...?! Dispatching a legendary underling... That old bag of bones is out of his mind!”

“You have colluded with the terrorist leader Ophis to undermine the cooperation of the allied forces. Your crimes warrant a thousand deaths. How could you, the driving force behind this alliance, stoop so low?”

What the heck was he spouting?! This came out of nowhere!

While I was still trying to process it all, Azazel was literally fuming! “...I see. So that’s how you’re playing it. You’ve thought up an excuse to eliminate us, the ones actually fighting the terrorists! How long have you been planning this?! You damn clowns!”

“We needn’t justify ourselves, but I’ll make an exception just this once... I am not so weak as to be outstripped by demons and fallen angels.”

“So you’re just here to harass us?!”

“Yes, you could say that. To us grim reapers, you demons and fallen angels are nothing more than eyesores.”

“So you’re mocking us now?!”

“No. I mean it. Your Ophis has become a fake. I shall take her off your hands.”

...!

Pluto vanished from sight! He was fast! And the very next moment...

Cliiiiing!

...a grating metallic sound rang out!

Azazel blocked the grim reaper’s scythe with the spear from his artificial Sacred Gear. He looked really intense!

“...I’ve just finished fixing it up after that beating from Cao Cao! It isn’t

completely restored yet, but I know I can't face you without it! Fafnir! Keep it up in there a bit longer, you hear me?!"

A golden aura flowed from Azazel's weapon, quickly solidifying around him as a suit of armor. Azazel unfurled his twelve black wings and pushed Pluto up into the air!

Clang! Ching!

The two began to exchange flashy blows high above the ruined parking lot. The grim reaper was following Azazel's attacks! He might have even been faster! Pluto swung his scythe at high speed, leaving dark afterimages as he did.

"Teach!"

"Stay back, Issei! I'll deal with this guy!" Azazel replied as he fought.

Boom! Boom! The air shuddered with every clash—proof of each combatant's strength!

"Since they're occupied, I'll be your opponent."

It was Siegfried. He'd already deployed his four additional dragon arms, wielding a demon sword in each of his six hands. His Balance Breaker was out, and he was ready to brawl!

His Sacred Gear doubles the power of each arm, right? If I remembered right, he could boost up to four stages, elevating his strength quite a bit. Should I launch straight into my Triaina, or try to hit him with a combo move...? My regular Balance Breaker definitely won't be enough!

Before I could decide, Kiba appeared next to me. "Issei, let me fight him."

It was rare for Kiba to be this openly hostile toward an opponent. He was glaring straight at Siegfried.

The six-armed hero grinned. "Yuuto Kiba. I heard you picked up a new ability."

"I couldn't forgive myself for losing so badly to you in Kyoto, so I trained by fighting the Red Dragon Emperor."

"That does sound interesting."

Kiba summoned a fresh Holy Demon Sword in his hand, pointing it at

Siegfried, who did the same with his six demon swords.

Dammit, it's like I'm not even here! I'd heard that swordsmen got lost in the heat of the moment, and it was totally true! I'd been reduced to a spectator!

While I seethed with frustration, Kiba vanished.

Chiiiiing!

A sharp metallic noise cut through the air! Sparks flew from each clash of blades. Kiba was moving at high speed, while Siegfried held him back with minimal movement.

I couldn't see Kiba at all. He was just getting faster and faster! I'd never seen anyone draw out the unique characteristics of a Knight to this extent!

That being said, high-speed attacks failed to reach Siegfried in our previous encounter with him. Kiba had failed to land a blow, even with Xenovia's help...

Maybe he had a secret plan this time?

Suddenly, a rip formed in Siegfried's clothes. Kiba's strikes were getting through, although only barely.

This didn't seem to bother Siegfried at all, and he merely grinned. "I see. You're faster and more skilled than before. But you can only reach me with the tip of your blade." A thin cut formed on Siegfried's chin as he spoke. Yes, Kiba's attacks were clearly better than before, but they weren't enough to inflict a deep wound!

Suddenly, Siegfried's blades shone bright!

"Nothung! Tyrfing!"

Swoosh!

As one of those demon swords slashed horizontally, it carved a huge spatial rift in the air. Another came racing down and blew a massive crater in the ground!

The first demon sword was razor-sharp, while the second specialized in raw destructive power!

"How about this next one? Balmung!"

Siegfried thrust with a blade shrouded in a huge mass of spiraling energy. It loosed an ominous vortex that tore through the air as it bore down on its target!

Kiba adjusted his weapon, shifting to a Holy Sword as he summoned a corps of dragon knights to shield himself! However, many of the dragon knights were shattered by the powerful swell of strength from Balmung, mercilessly scattered to the wind!

The remaining dragon knights leaped at Siegfried swiftly!

“Hah! Dainsleif!”

Another horizontal cut brought huge pillars of ice erupting from the ground, and they were headed for Kiba! They struck his dragon knights and froze them in place!

Cr-cr-crack!

With a faint sound, the knights shattered with the frigid columns...! Siegfried’s demon sword collection was utterly brutal! A few simple strokes proved absolutely devastating!

Kiba had managed to get close, but he wouldn’t be able to maintain his attacks forever!

Despite my concern, the remaining dragon knights launched into a fresh attack.

Siegfried must have sensed that their biggest weakness lay in their fragility, as he started dodging the oncoming strikes without bothering to counter.

“All it took was the exchange of a few blows to figure out your new Balance Breaker’s weaknesses! You’ve projected your abilities onto your dragon knights, haven’t you? Although it appears they can’t use your techniques. All they have is speed—which means they’re no match for me!”

Siegfried moved to destroy the final dragon knight, but its movements were different from the others. It adjusted its trajectory and sliced off one of Siegfried’s scaly extra arms!

Something strange fell over Siegfried’s body, and he shook with agony! He

shot a glare at the dragon knight who managed to land such a powerful hit.

The dragon knight removed its helmet to reveal...Kiba!

“Impossible...! That was you?!”

It had looked as though Kiba were directing his dragon knights from a distance, but that distant figure had since vanished!

The real Kiba, garbed like his dragon knights, removed his armor and flashed Siegfried a dauntless grin. “That was an illusion, forged with demon magic. I hid myself among my knights and waited for you to let your guard down.”

Seriously?! He did all that?!

“I joined the ranks of my knights while using them as a shield. I anticipated that you would discern their weakness quickly and get careless. Sure enough, you did just that. That’s how you heroes operate. You always target known shortcomings, and I used that tendency to my advantage.”

Kiba was incredible! Turning his own vulnerability into a weapon at the last minute!

Siegfried appeared shocked by his own sloppiness.

“This pain... When did you acquire the power to slay dragons?!”

Now it was my turn to be surprised! What was he talking about?!

Kiba gripped his weapon tightly. “Given your Sacred Gear’s dragon attributes, I knew there was no way you could withstand the effects of a dragon-slaying holy sword.”

“Dragon-slaying holy and demon swords are said to be the hardest to make. Yet you’ve done so successfully. You must possess incredible talent.”

Seriously?! Kiba can forge dragon-slaying Holy Swords now?! That’s incredible! Why didn’t he tell me? I’ll have to give him a good scolding later!

“Shortly after the confrontation against Diodora Astaroth, Azazel suggested I work on dragon-slaying swords—both holy and demon ones. It was to be a countermeasure if Issei lost control again. Naturally, I can create dragon-slaying Holy Demon Swords as well.”

He developed that new power to stop me?

Well, if I did end up going berserk again, I'd gladly accept being taken down by my friends.

Kiba forced a grin. "But after that, Issei gave up on his Juggernaut Drive and set off looking for a power he could control. Likewise, I abandoned the idea of making dragon-slaying Holy Demon Swords. But after losing to you, I found a reason to pursue it again."

Siegfried gritted his teeth. I would never have expected to see that confident hero look so furious. This must have been humiliating for him.

"Just as I expected," Rias said as she landed next to me. "Issei, you train with Yuuto regularly, yes?"

"Huh? Er, I do, yeah."

"I think that's amazing. I admire Yuuto's ability to keep up with you. You're strong, Issei—so much so that you overcame Sairaorg after he combined with that Longinus lion. So what do you think about Yuuto, given all the work you've done together?"

"He's a total monster. He goes toe-to-toe against me without any armor for protection."

That pretty boy abandoned all notions of increasing his defense, which was always his shortcoming. He reasoned that wouldn't be an issue if he didn't get hit. In fact, his training was all about avoiding my attacks.

When we sparred, we considered it my win if I managed to land a blow. If I couldn't, there was no telling how the bout might end.

"Your own progress might overshadow Yuuto's, but he's grown to be incredibly skilled in his own right. As far as I'm concerned, both of you are strong enough to hold your own as young demon prodigies," Rias said, smiling with obvious pride for us members of her Familia.

Azazel had said something similar after the match against the Bael Familia. He'd claimed that Kiba would take the spotlight in professional Dice Figures matches.

With his piece value of 3, it was much easier for him to enter the fray compared to my value of 8. In those kinds of fights, Kiba was the more versatile fighter.

“Training with the Red Dragon Emperor has helped me reach my highest level yet. I’d recommend you try practicing with him at least once... But you’d better be prepared to lay down your life if you do. Issei doesn’t hold back,” Kiba remarked.

“I see.” Siegfried sighed. “I’ll give it some thought. If you can survive this, that is.”

Fog gathered around the hero, and a host of grim reapers appeared from the mist!

That had to be the work of Georg’s Sacred Gear! He was using it to summon more grim reapers! A ridiculous number of them! They were flooding the parking lot!

There had to be two hundred of them—no, three hundred!

“You managed to dodge a few scythes, but what about this many? I think they’re sure to land a few hits.” Siegfried grinned triumphantly.

Quantity over quality. No matter how many of them we took down, all it would take was a single blow. If they started cutting away at each of our life forces, we would eventually fall. Heck, I was still recovering, so there was no telling how many strikes I could withstand!

“Oh dear, this will be a headache,” Akeno said from up high as she rained down bolts of Holy Lightning before landing to join us.

Rias, Kiba, Akeno, and I gathered together, ready to face the swarm... The question was, how would we break through?

By my rough count, there were over a thousand grim reapers now. The entire artificial plane, from the parking lot to the hotel above, was crawling with them. None of them dared approach the fight between Azazel and Pluto, however.

There was no way that we could avoid an attack from them all at once. One of their scythes would inevitably make contact.

Were I able to use my Triaina Bishop form, a shot from my Dragon Blaster might be enough to carve a way out of this. However, I didn't have the remaining strength to pull that off. I'd already pushed myself too hard.

While I struggled to think of my next move, fresh voices called out from within me.

"Hey, Issei Hyoudou. Looks like you're in a pinch."

"It does seem like a real mess."

"Grim reapers can be a nuisance."

Those voices! Could it be?! My predecessors?!

I shut my eyes, focusing on my Sacred Gear.

The pure white world within was typically filled with only chairs and desks. Yet now, the previous Red Dragon Emperors stood dressed in fancy attire, holding wineglasses!

One of the Red Dragon Emperors swirled his empty cup. *"Oh-ho-ho. There's only one way out of a crisis like this, wouldn't you say? You'll have to use that."*

"That"? As in...?

"Right! It's the only way!"

"Indeed!"

They were in unanimous agreement! It seemed they were telling me to use my Juggernaut Drive again! My stomach turned cold in anticipation of that ominous chant.

To my surprise, my predecessors shook their fingers at my misconception.

"Wrong!"

"Yep, we've moved on from the Juggernaut Drive!"

"You've shown us something even more wonderful. Yes..."

""The power of breasts!"" they finished as one.

...

H-huh...? Wh-what on earth are you all saying?! Y-you're crazy! Arghhhhh!

They were elegantly dressed—yet they were blabbering about the power of breasts?! It was Azazel’s idea to find a different sort of power, and now they agreed?!

Damn it! How can you guys say that while looking so cheerful?!

The other Red Dragon Emperors ignored my protesting and created a vision for me above—a sight of familiar breasts!

Hold on, aren’t those Rias’s?! But she was standing right next to me!

One of my predecessors pointed at them. *“Let’s draw upon those breasts.”*

“Right, they’re the source of the Breast Dragon’s strength. They’ll help him protect the future.”

“After you reached out to us, we, too, became breast aficionados. Oh-ho-ho. It isn’t bad at all.”

What were these weirdos saying?! I couldn’t understand!

Suddenly, they all turned serious.

“The time has come for the Switch Princess to return to the stage.”

I was left at a loss for words... It was just too erotic... This situation was beyond control!

“T-Teach! Something major’s going on over here!” I called out to Azazel, who was still fighting off Pluto.

“What is it now, you moron?! Can’t you see I’m busy with this grim reaper bastard?! Wait, is this about what Tannin mentioned?! Don’t tell me it’s *that*?! It is, isn’t it!” he cried, obviously bewildered even as he ducked under Pluto’s scythe.

“My predecessors are telling me to use Rias’s breasts to level up!” I shouted.

Azazel started dancing wildly sky. “Yeeaaaahhh! It’s time! Do it! Now! Touch ’em! Grope ’em! Bwa-ha-ha-ha! Hey, all you hero and grim reaper scum! Witness the famed breast power these two have! It’s the Gremory Familia’s ultimate technique!”

He’s just pissing them off!

“...No... It can't be...”

Why is Siegfried recoiling in fear?!

“Listen up, kid! The time has come to transfer your power to those breasts!” a strict-looking predecessor commanded.

T-transfer my power...? Do you mean using my gift ability on Rias's chest?

It was a gentler past Red Dragon Emperor who answered. *“Indeed. I'm sure you've wondered what might happen if you used it that way... It's time to see for yourself.”*

Sending power to her boobs?! Honestly, I did wonder what would happen if I sent them some Red Dragon Emperor energy.

Would they increase in size? Become even more beautiful? Gain increased elasticity to bounce with greater momentum? I always dreamed of knowing the answer one day!

This was the research topic I wanted to devote myself to, and they were giving me the go-ahead!

“U-um, Rias, can I ask you something?!”

I absolutely needed her permission before attempting this.

“What? Nothing will surprise me now,” she answered.

What incredible resolution. What determination. Hers was no normal state of mind. How many battles did one have to survive to be willing to meet the demands of a breast maniac...?

I swallowed hard. “...Do you mind if I transfer my Red Dragon Emperor power into your breasts?”

“—.”

My question struck her speechless. Déjà vu swept over me. It was just like in Kyoto!

After giving my request some thought, she declared emphatically, “Nope, I don't get it. I still don't know what happened in Kyoto, and I don't really understand what's happening now, either. But I trust you! Please transfer your

power into my breasts!”

—! ...*Wh-what a good, generous woman!*

Anyone else would have rejected me outright! Yet she gave me the okay just like that! I was humbled by the generosity of my master, of my beloved great lady!

I roared from within my armor as I poured strength into my gauntlet! This was it! The woman I’d fallen in love with was cool with it! I had to show her the type of man I was!

It was time to transfer! To use my gift ability!

“Let’s go, Boosted Gear! Send my power into Rias’s breasts! Nowwwwww!”

The armor around my hands disappeared, so my fingers could touch her directly! It was definitely necessary that I feel her chest with my bare skin!

Squish!

Ah, their wonderful elasticity coursed through me!

“Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost!”

“Transfer!”

“Yahhhhhhhhhh!” Rias shouted.

Pshiiiiing...!

Her breasts lit up with a brilliant red aura!

“Bust! Bust! Bust! Bust! Bust! Bust! Bust! Bust! Bust! Bust!”

An unfamiliar voice spoke from the jewel on my gauntlet. We went from *boost* to *bust*!

“Your breasts are glowing!” I exclaimed.

Shiiiiine!

A crimson flash erupted from them and wrapped itself around me!

It was a gentle radiance, almost like Asia’s Twilight Healing, and it was warm.

The warmth of Rias’s body...

As I stood surrounded by the essence of the woman of my dreams, I sensed a change.

“This is... My power’s returning!”

Yes, all that energy consumed by my Dragon Blaster was coming back! Strength gathered in me! Believe me, it was amazing! The amassing power was incredible!

“Your third phase!” Azazel shouted from overhead. “Rias! Your breasts have entered their third phase! Breast power! It’s just as I predicted! This is further proof of the power of breasts!”

I—I don’t quite get it, but I can fight now!

I could let loose with my Dragon Blaster!

“Promoting to Welsh Blaster Bishop!”

“Change: Fang Blast!”

With no time to waste, I Promoted and donned my backpack unit and cannons! And I aimed them right at that huge army of grim reapers!

“Take thiiiiisssss!”

A third use of my Dragon Blaster!

Booooooooooom!

An enormous stream of power lanced from the two barrels. The grim reapers had nowhere to run and where fully engulfed!

One shot had wiped out a third of the enemy force! Unfortunately, it took so much energy that I wouldn’t be able to give a repeat performance. Apparently that breast light power-up was good for one extra Dragon Shot!

Biiiiiiiiii!

—! What on earth?!

Rias’s breasts were shooting a beam of crimson light straight for me! Red light surrounded me, restoring my strength again!

“Bust! Bust! Bust! Bust! Bust! Bust! Bust! Bust! Bust! Bust!”

The jewel in my gauntlet was getting increasingly excited as it took in the red aura!

“This is bad!” Siegfried shouted as he watched on. “We can’t let those breasts keep doing that! To think, boobs that respond and replenish the Red Dragon Emperor’s energy! There’s no telling what they might do next! Rias Gremory’s chest might be more terrifying than the Two Heavenly Dragons and Ophis! When she and the Red Dragon Emperor come together, miracles rain down in succession... And those breasts are at the center of it all!”

You don’t have to say it all out loud so seriously!

“...”

Look! Poor Rias is mortified!

“You could call her the Crimson Bust Princess!” Azazel offered while fighting Pluto. “And that attack of hers, it’s her Breast Beam! Or Breast Battery! Seriously, you guys are out of this world!”

“Shuuuuut up! Just focus on fighting!”

Don’t start giving everything weird names! They’re definitely going to follow us for the rest of our lives!

“...I see. So I’m a *beam*, and a *battery*...”

Rias looked despondent!

No, no, no! It’s okay! I’ll protect you! Argh! It doesn’t even sound convincing to me!

“Stop those two!” Siegfried ordered.

Paying him no mind, I fired another Dragon Blaster to wipe out more grim reapers. And the moment that my aura was spent, the crimson light pouring from Rias’s breasts was there to replenish it!



“Bust! Bust! Bust! Bust! Bust! Bust! Bust! Bust! Bust! Bust!”

“Issei...,” Rias muttered, chest still shining. “I...I want to give you so much!”

“—! Wh-what do you mean?”

“No, I should give a better declaration of resolve... I don’t mind using my breasts as a power-up item for the Red Dragon Emperor if they’ll make you stronger.”

“Wh-what...?! I never thought you’d be okay with that...!”

I’d hoped, of course! But let’s just say I didn’t!

Rias smiled gently and nodded.

No, don’t look at me like that! You’ll wrench out my heart!

“Yes, I know. But my breasts chose this for themselves. Ha-ha-ha. Maybe they understand how much I want to help you, and this is their response.”

Suddenly, an unbelievable sight began to unfold! Rias’s tits were getting smaller!

“H-huuuuuh?! Y-your boobs?! They’re shrinking?!” I cried out loud as I burst into tears.

My breasts! My favorite breasts! My first breasts! Those breasts that exist only for me! The greatest breasts I’ve ever known!

They were shrinking! Withering away!

“I wonder if sending power to you reduces them. At this size, I should still be able to transfer more!”

“Don’t!” I insisted, shaking my head. “If you keep going, they’ll...! Those breasts I love so dearly will vanish!”

“It could be temporary. They might go back to normal after a good night’s sleep!”

“Even if you’re right, I don’t want to watch them shrink! I’d rather die...!”

I would sooner choose death! I didn’t want to live if it meant that those darling boobs would be no more!

“Thank you, Issei,” Rias said with a tearful smile. “But it’s okay. Fighting by your side...it makes me so happy. I love you, Issei!”

I was bawling beneath my armor! *Wh-what a wonderful woman! The girl of my dreams! She’s perfect! I...I’m so glad I fell for you!*

“I love you, too, Rias! Rias! Rias! Rias!” I roared.

“We’ll be together forever, Issei!” she replied tearfully. “Issei! Issei! Issei!”

“Bust! Bust! Bust! Bust! Bust! Bust! Bust! Bust! Bust! Bust!”

Vrrrrrrnnnnnn!

The power being channeled to me surged!

I can do this! We can do this! Isn’t that right, Ddraig?

“Heh... Breasts are fun...”

Had the pressures on his weakened psyche proven too much?

“Ddraaiiggg! Hraaaaahhhhhhh! I’m the Breast Dragon! I’ll draw on the Switch Princess’s and the Red Dragon Emperor’s powers to blow you terrorists away! This is payback for Ddraig!”

I fired my Dragon Blaster, sending the grim reapers and the surrounding scenery flying! Already my breast strength was recharging! Destruction and regeneration, rinse and repeat! The wheel of destiny turned!

“Bust! Bust! Bust! Bust! Bust! Bust! Bust! Bust! Bust! Bust!”

Booooooooooom!

The field itself was starting to collapse under the weight of my rapid-fire Dragon Blasters!

“Stopppp! Stop that Breast Dragon and his Switch Princess! Now! At this rate, they’ll wipe us all out!” Siegfried cried, frantically trying to give directions to the grim reapers.

“Everyone, do whatever you can to protect those love-struck idiots! They’re our way out of here!” Azazel ordered.

“I won’t let you interfere. It’s rude to get in the way when people are pouring

out their hearts to one another, don't you agree?"

"Oh-ho-ho. I envy you, Rias. I might have to spoil Issei after all this. The more I watch you, the more I find myself dying to begin our affair."

Kiba and Akeno stepped in to shield us!

And so our bombardment of love continued!

The battlefield was so thoroughly devastated that even the little weeds were vaporized.

Yes, the power of the love shared between Rias and me had at last wiped out the grim reapers, leaving only Siegfried, Georg, and Pluto. But this feat had come at great sacrifice—Rias's chest was now flat.

She was exhausted after sending all that breast power to me. That wondrous plumpness was nowhere to be seen.

Even if they would return to normal with rest, this was still a tragic and unbearable sight to behold. They were hardly any different from Koneko's now...!

Just thinking of those two girls' chests was enough to bring me to tears.

Gah!

Koneko threw something from the thirtieth floor of the hotel, hitting me on the back of the head. I didn't say anything. She must have guessed what I was thinking by reading my expression.

Azazel pulled back from Pluto, landing near us, while his foe likewise alighted by his allies.

"Well, Siegfried, Georg. I guess this is checkmate," Azazel remarked, pointing the tip of his luminous spear their way.

"...Your offensive powers are as insane as ever, Red Dragon Emperor," Siegfried admitted.

Georg was panting.

The device in the parking lot was still functional. Georg had created a small but durable defensive barrier that could withstand multiple attacks from my

Dragon Blaster. Still, doing so left him gasping for air, and the magic shield around the ouroboros statue was distorting.

Even someone with a high-level Longinus had his limits! Just a little more, and we'd have him and the others cornered!

Siegfried looked overcome with bitterness about that.

Bang! Tear!

A cracking sound echoed all around. I recognized that noise. A hole was being torn into this dimension. Sure enough, when I looked up, there was a gaping fissure in the sky!

I was expecting more enemies, but Siegfried and his cohorts seemed distressed... Was it an unexpected intruder?

Descending from that spatial rift was a man dressed in light armor and a cloak...

I knew that figure. Sure, I'd seen him only once, but his face was etched in my memory!

He touched down between us and Siegfried. "It's been a while, Red Dragon Emperor. And Vali, too." He looked to me, and then Vali, still up in the hotel.

Azazel's eyes narrowed. "Shalba Beelzebub. The leader of the old Demon King regime."

Yep, this was the guy descended from the original Beelzebub, the one who'd manipulated Diodora behind the scenes and popped up during our encounter with him!

I thought he died after I went into my Juggernaut Drive...

"Shalba..." Siegfried stepped forward. "I read the reports, but I never believed you'd act independently."

"You guys have been a great help, Siegfried. I owe you my gratitude. My wounds have been healed, thanks to you... Although I did lose Ophis's serpent, leaving my powers diminished compared to what they once were."

"So why are you here?"

“Oh? I thought a declaration of war was in order,” he replied, supremely confident.

What’s this joker getting at?

Shalba broke into an ugly grin as he pulled back his cape to reveal a boy.

The child’s eyes were clouded, as though under some kind of spell. Something about him struck a chord in my memory.

Ah! He’s the one with the Longinus that created all those anti-monsters back in Kyoto, the one with the Annihilation Maker!

He belonged to the Hero Faction, so what was he doing with Shalba Beelzebub from the old Demon King regime?

Siegfried and Georg were just as shocked as we were.

“...Leonardo!”

“Shalba! Why did you bring him here?! What are you doing with him?! Leonardo was supposed to be working on new strategies! Did you abduct him?!”

Shalba flashed the two bewildered heroes a smile. “I thought I would have him give me a little help... Like this!”

Vrrrrnnnnnn!

A small magic circle appeared at the palm of Shalba’s hand, radiating an ominous aura. He brought it close to Leonardo, as demon script flowed through the array swiftly. The boy let out a shriek in response.

“Aaaaarrrrrggggghhhhh!” he cried, anguish plain on his face.

But at the same time, his shadow expanded to cover the entire field!

What was that bastard Shalba doing?!

“Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!” he laughed, floating up into the air. “The Annihilation Maker is a wonderful ability! What’s more, it specializes in creating anti-monsters! I took the kid while he was out on a mission with one of your squads! The others resisted a little, so I’m afraid I had to kill them! And now I will have this child create a monster to eradicate the demon pretenders!”

Vrrrrnnnnnnnn.

Something began to emerge from Leonardo's shadow, the darkness expanding and rippling as a gigantic entity reared its head!

Its skull was enormous, and its body was unbelievably large! Each arm was thicker than a tree, and two overwhelmingly massive legs supported the whole frame.

A titanic creature emerged from the shadow, crashing onto the battlefield.

"Rooooooooooaaaaarrrrr!"

Its roar was so intense that it threatened to burst my eardrums!

It was a colossal monster, impossibly huge—at least twice the size of the Great Red! It had to be around two hundred meters tall! Azazel did say the Annihilation Maker could fabricate just about any kind of monster depending on the user's proficiency, but this was inconceivable! I had to doubt my eyes.

On top of that, countless smaller monsters were pouring from the boy's shadow, and by "smaller," I mean they were still a hundred meters high!

Vroooooom!

A gigantic magic circle formed beneath the monsters. A teleportation array!

"Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!" Shalba laughed. "Now, I'll warp these monsters into the underworld and let them wreak havoc! Anti-monsters of this scale will destroy every last demon alive!"

The circle shone bright, preparing to send the monsters away.

Crap! At this rate, those creatures will wreak havoc on innocent demons! We have to do something!

"Stop them!"

Following Azazel's directions, we launched into an assault against the gigantic monsters... Yet our attacks did nothing! Just how durable were these things?! We couldn't so much as scratch them! Our efforts were entirely in vain, and the creatures vanished! And no sooner had they gone than...

Grrrrrrrrrrnnnn...

...unsettling noises sounded from all over. Fissures ran through the white sky, and the buildings—the hotel included—were beginning to collapse!

Shalba drawing out those monsters and sending them to another plane must have made this one unstable!

“I can’t maintain the device any longer!” Georg shouted to Siegfried. “That cursed Shalba! He pushed that Longinus’s abilities way past its user’s capacity!”

“...We’ve no other choice. For now, let’s retrieve Leonardo and fall back. Pluto, you—”

Siegfried must have stopped when he realized that Pluto had departed.

Yep, he’d vanished before anyone noticed!

Siegfried seemed to come to a realization. “I see... He was helping Shalba from the shadows... I guess I shouldn’t be surprised that skeleton god stooped so low. He’d do anything to mess with us. Did he teach Shalba how to push the Annihilation Maker beyond its limits to make those monsters...? There’s no telling what kind of cost or side effects might result from this... And the poor kid...”

Siegfried and Georg retrieved Leonardo, who lay unconscious on the ground. Then they disappeared in a cloud of fog.

Damn them all, those bastards! Beating a quick escape after all that!

Boom! Boom!

Explosions came from the hotel!

What the heck?! There’s really no time to rest today!

I spotted Shalba up by the building, lashing out at our rearguard with demonic attacks!

“What’s wrong, Valiiiiii?! What happened to your vaunted demon powers?! Your White Dragon Emperor abilities?! Is something the matter?! Bwa-ha-ha-ha! You human-demon bastard! You never stood a chance against me, a true Demon King!”

Shalba was attacking Vali! In his current state, I doubted Vali would be able to

keep up!

Sure enough, he'd already activated a protective magic square and was stuck purely on the defensive. The situation certainly didn't look good.

"...You're one to boast about being a Demon King, always relying on the abilities of others," Vali shot back.

"Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! All that matters is winning! And there's something I want!" Shalba jabbed a finger at Ophis.

Instantly, a spiral-shaped plume of demonic power covered in roving demon letters shot out, twisting around her like a rope.

She was trapped!

"Oh! So the intel was right! Ophis's powers are unstable, making her easy prey for me in my weakened state! I'll take her as a prize for those wise enough to align themselves with a true Demon King! Maybe I'll have her give me a fresh serpent! You're mine!"

"Like hell she is!"

"Jet!"

Spreading my dragon wings, I launched myself straight for him!

"A curse!" Shalba cried with a foul grin. "I'll be a curse! The poison that consumes the underworld...! All those demons who rejected me! I've no use for them anymore! I don't care! Yes, supremacy and control of the underworld are irrelevant! Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! I, Shalba Beelzebub, shall use these last vestiges of power to destroy the underworld with my monsters!"

His face was contorted in ecstasy! There was something seriously wrong with this guy! He'd lost it!

The next thing I knew, he was pointing straight at me!

"...Yes, all those children you care so deeply about shall be annihilated by my curse—by those monsters! They will suffer! They will struggle! They will die choking on their own blood! Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! *This* is my masterpiece! All the kids of the underworld, from the lowest of the low through to the highest of the high, shall perish equally! Do you see?! This is what you want! An

underworld free of class distinction! Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

What a scumbag! All he cared about was revenge! He’d lost all attachment to the underworld after being rejected. But that didn’t justify taking his frustrations out on children!

Meanwhile, the battlefield continued collapsing. Gaping holes were beginning to emerge in the walls, sucking in the remnants of this artificial plane!

“The pocket dimension is at its limit!” Kuroka shouted from the hotel room. “We can teleport now, so I’ll create a magic circle! We need to get out of here!”

We all hurried to gather by Kuroka as she activated her teleportation array. At the same time, Asia set to healing Vali, who’d been injured by Shalba’s attacks.

“Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!” Shalba cackled, delighted at taking Ophis hostage.

As I looked upon her, two separate thoughts set my mind in motion.

“Issei! We’re leaving!” Rias declared. “Come over here, quickly!”

However, I remained where I was.

“...Issei?” she asked, looking on, puzzled.

“I’m going to save Ophis. And I’ll give Shalba a good beating, too.”

“!!!!!!!!!!!!!! —!”

The others were left stunned by this announcement.

“I’ll fight, too!” Kiba declared.

“Don’t go showing off by yourself!” Akeno added.

“No, I’ll be fine alone. You all need to go back to the underworld to warn people about those anti-monsters. This artificial dimension won’t hold much longer, right? In my armor, I should be okay for a bit after it collapses, like Vali. We can’t let Shalba get away, and we can’t let him have Ophis, either.”

This was something only I could do. Undoubtedly, Azazel’s artificial Balance Breaker was already at its limit. If I didn’t take down Shalba here, he would only claim more victims in the future! And he’d boasted about killing the children! I couldn’t allow that!

“I can’t hold it any longer! If we don’t make the jump now, we never will!” Kuroka screamed.

“Issei Hyoudou,” Vali said, leaning on Azazel’s shoulder. From what I could tell, he was in tremendous pain. Shalba’s earlier attacks must have inflicted major damage.

“Vali! I’ll make sure to hit Shalba a few times for you!”

The corners of his mouth twisted in a grin.

“Issei! I’ll open a Dragon Gate later to summon you and Ophis! How’s that sound?” Azazel suggested.

I nodded back to him.

Thanks, Teach!

I spread my wings and ignited the booster on my back!

“Issei!”

The last voice was of my beloved. Glancing over my shoulder, I saw Rias.

“Be sure to come back to me.”

“I will!” I answered before launching myself after Shalba.

The teleportation circle burst with light. As best I understood, everyone got out okay.

Now all I had to do was send Shalba packing, rescue Ophis, and return to Rias!



I landed in front of Shalba, who was still giggling to himself. The collapse of the artificial dimension was accelerating. More than half of the battlefield was already gone.

His face screwed up with clear annoyance when he saw me. “Vali is one thing, but for a failed Heavenly Dragon like you to oppose me...what an insult!”

Yeah, yeah, whatever. This was coming from the guy who constantly mocked everyone around him.

“Why do you stand against me? Do you underestimate the rightful heir to a Demon King name, as so many others have?! Or do you desire greater power by

usurping Ophis?! You want supremacy over the human realm and the underworld alike, don't you?!"

Yep, this guy's head had no room for anything other than bloodlines and domination.

"There's no use shouting about all those complicated topics," I said with a sigh. "I don't get them. I wouldn't know what to do with Ophis, and I'm not interested in control or whatever. But..." I paused there, pointing at him with my hand. "You said you were going to kill children, didn't you? I can't let that stand."

"So what?!" Shalba scoffed. "That's only natural! Demons born and raised in an underworld run by fake Demon Kings—they're pests! When they grow up, they won't respect *me*, a *true* Demon King! So they should be exterminated! I'll use those huge anti-monsters to reduce them all to dust! I made those behemoths with the Annihilation Maker, so you can be sure they'll bring untold devastation! Then a pure underworld can rise from the remains! A proper underworld!"

This guy was beyond hope. Sirzechs could be eccentric, but I had to admit that he was the greatest and worthiest Demon King.

"You're out of your mind... And I can't let anyone who threatens kids do as they please!"

I couldn't let that go! All their smiling faces surfaced in my mind!

Don't worry, everyone. I'll protect you! I'll defend your smiles!

"I'll just have to knock you down!" I cried, unleashing my aura. "I'm a children's hero! I can't forgive the likes of you. I'm the Breast Dragon!"

Shalba's grin faltered. "You seem more menacing all of a sudden. A Heavenly Dragon acting in ways beyond comprehension. Very well. Bathe in my curse and perish in the void, Red Dragon Emperor!"

"Right back at you, third-rate demon!"

The Evil Piece within me exploded!

"Cardinal Crimson Promotion—my True Queen, named by my rival, Sairaorg!"

“Awakening, we, the Red Dragon Emperor, speak this truth unto the heavens!”

The voices of my predecessors spoke in my mind!

“Let’s go, Issei Hyoudou!”

“Yeah! The future... We’re a Red Dragon Emperor who will defend everyone’s future!”

“It’s time to walk the Red Road of Righteousness!”

“I embrace infinite hope and immortal dreams, to become the Crimson Dragon Dynast...”

This was my chant! A new one, a better one, completely different from my Juggernaut Drive!

“““...I shall lead you down the crimson way of the primordial!”””

“Cardinal Crimson Full Drive!!!!”

A crimson aura enveloped my body, dyeing my armor in a fresh color!

“—! Crimson armor?! Wh-what kind of change is this?! Crimson...! A vile shade, just like the hair of that pretender!” Shalba spat.

As far as I was concerned, crimson was the greatest color of them all!

My armor changed in shape slightly, and at the same time, power surged from my body! The energy of the mighty Red Dragon Emperor enveloping me was the real thing! It was still rising, but this was already plenty!

All that remained was to beat this guy into the ground!

Shalba stuck out his hand toward me, warping the air around him. Fly-like creatures spilled forth, flooding the surrounding area.

“I will show you the power of the true Beelzebub!” he roared, manipulating the swarm of insects into several layers of rings, which loosed waves of potent demonic energy!

“Star Sonic Booster!”

I dodged those oncoming attacks in the blink of an eye, rapidly closing the

distance as I threw a powerful punch for Shalba's abdomen!

"Solid Impact Booster!"

Crimson power enveloped my right arm, swelling into a huge fist! The firing hammer at my elbow sounded, dealing a crushing body blow!

Thud!

My fist dug deep into Shalba's stomach!

"Gah!" Blood flew from his mouth. "Y-you low-class upstarrrrrrrt!" he cried, deploying more magic circles and firing shot after shot of different elemental attacks, just like Rossweisse! And every last one of them was ridiculously overpowered!

Still, I wasn't about to turn tail. I faced the barrage head-on!

These attacks...! I don't even need to dodge them...!

I knocked aside those rays of elemental power with my fists, charging in with godly speed!

And once I was in range, I hurled a second punch!

"Solid Impact Booster!"

Wham!

My massive fist connected with Shalba's cheek!

His face was wet with blood after that blow.

"Is that all you've got?" I asked, bored.

At this, blue veins throbbed around Shalba's temples. "What did you...?"

He was incensed now, but I didn't care.

"You keep calling yourself a Demon King, so I assumed you had to be as good as Sirzechs or Vali. I've fought both of them, so I know how strong a proper Lucifer is. You... You're nothing."

Shalba's face twisted. "Why you...?! A mere dragon...?! You, a former human—literal trash—dare mock a true Demon King...?!"

"I'm one of the two Heavenly Dragons, the Red Dragon Emperor! I'm not

about to lose to some faker!”

“You bastard! You rotten dragon scum! Nghhhhh!”

He shot more blasts of demonic energy at me, and I batted them away. Shalba recoiled with every one of my hits! I blasted his creepy flies out of the sky with a chain of Dragon Shots!

I was at an overwhelming advantage.

Is this all he has? It sure looks like it!

This man blabbed on and on about the underworld. Sirzechs and Sairaorg could’ve taken him down easily! Heck, Sairaorg kept standing each time I knocked him down, always ready to fight for his dreams! Yet Shalba didn’t have that same drive! That spark of life was absent from his eyes!

“Shalba, I’m sure you’ve got incredible talent and demonic power. You were born with something greater than I am.”

“That’s right! I’m one of the chosen! A Demon King! A *true* Demon King!”

“But it’s pointless. Compared to someone else I know, who came at me with nothing more than his own fists and body, you’re just an annoying bug. Moves like yours aren’t enough to defeat me!”

Thump!

How many blows did I hammer into him? In any event, I could sense that the end was near. Shalba looked more anguished than ever.

Yep, I could beat this guy without relying on my Juggernaut Drive! What was he going on about, being a true Demon King and restarting the underworld? All those people I fought in the underworld were way tougher than this jerk! They were each stronger and more dedicated!

“You blasted Heavenly Dragon! Let’s see how you handle thisssss!” Shalba screamed, deploying a fresh magic circle from the palms of his hands.

A single arrow emerged!

Whoosh!

It shot through the air at high speed, piercing the armor and digging into my

right arm.

Something like this won't...

I tried pulling it out, but I was racked with intense pain! Indescribable agony coursed down my arm into my whole body! Strength left me, and my hands trembled!

What's...happening?

“Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!” Shalba cackled as he watched. “That must be painful, right? Excruciating? Of course it is! The tip of that arrow is coated with Samael’s blood! A little something Hades let me borrow! I kept it on hand to use against Vali, just in case... I didn’t expect to waste it on trash like you, but so be it. And so we find our positions reversed. With demonic power equal to Vali’s you might survive. However, for someone with such inconsequential strength, death will arrive shortly.”

Ah, Samael’s blood. Is this the Dragon Eater’s poison? His curse? Wait, Hades teamed up with this joker, too? That grim reaper must have led him here...

It explained why Pluto left in a hurry. What on earth was Hades after by using the Hero Faction and the old Demon King regime? Did he want them to destroy each other? Both Azazel and Siegfried claimed Hades liked to stir up trouble.

Damn, that arrow really hurt. This was the first time I’d been injured by a dragon-slaying weapon. I could feel myself growing faint. My whole body ached, and I couldn’t control the chills and tremors.

“I can feel it, too, partner. I might black out...”

Ddraig existed only in spirit, yet Samael’s curse affected him as well.

Gah!

Blood coursed down my mouth... This was a different kind of pain than the damage inflicted by Cao Cao’s Holy Spear.

But having endured that torment, I found myself able—albeit only barely—to weather this agony, too. Was I growing used to physical suffering? I was constantly thrown into regular life-or-death crises.

For now, I had to focus on beating the guy in front of me to a pulp! I spread

my dragon wings wide, taking off straight for him!

“Why isn’t the curse affecting you?!” he cried, obviously astonished. “How can you move?! Why aren’t you afraid?! Don’t you fear death?!”

Shut up! Of course I’m scared! But I’m more frightened of what you’ll do if I let you live! So I’ll pound you into oblivion first!

“Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost! Boost!”

Thud! Pow! Thump!

A barrage of punches and kicks! I hit him with every physical combo I could think of!

Shalba fell to his knees on the hotel roof.

“Impossible...!” he spat. “I’m a true Demon King! I resorted to shamefully allying with Hades and humans for revenge! I even demeaned myself by aiding those heroes with their foul experiments...! You and Vali! Why do you Heavenly Dragons continue to stand in my way?! How can you insult me so?! I can’t fathom it! I can’t! Nghhhhh!”

Shalba turned to his captive. “Ophis! Give me another one of those serpents! Then I’ll assume power beyond other Demon King–class beings! I *need* your serpent to defeat this dragon!”

“I am unstable now. I cannot make a serpent to increase one’s strength.”

Shalba visibly gave in to despair at that reply... His vision of dominating the underworld hinged on Ophis giving him power again... It was laughable.

I landed before the trembling Shalba, who looked up at me.

“You wanted to rob children of their joy and smiles!” I shouted into his face. “That’s reason enough for me to beat the living daylights out of you! I’m a children’s hero, the Breast Dragon! If you think you’re going to rob them of their future, I’ll end you here and now!”

I deployed my cannons from my wings, preparing to unleash a bombardment of demonic energy!

A quiet rumbling built as my aura raged, gathering in the barrels.

Shalba spread his wings, attempting to flee into the sky... But I wasn't about to let him escape! I wasn't naive enough to let him get away, knowing what he hoped to achieve!

"Take this! Crimsoooooooooonnnnnn Blasterrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr!"

"Fang Blast Booster!"

Boooooooooooooom!

A huge wave of deep red shot from the cannons!

“Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Kill me if you like, but Samael’s poison will end you, Red Dragon Emperorrrrrrrrrrrrrr!” Shalba screamed.

With Shalba defeated, I freed Ophis from her restraints while doing my best to withstand the agony of Samael's curse. It was so excruciating that I wanted to tear myself apart.

“Red Dragon Emperor. Why did you save me?” she asked.

"You helped Asia and Irina," I answered.

“That was an expression of my gratitude to them. It is not a reason for you to aid me.”

“Asia and Irina are my friends, and they’re very important to me. You helped them, and that’s reason enough for me to save you... Besides, I’m starting to think you’re not such a bad person. Why did you cooperate with all those bad guys, though?”

“They promised to help me defeat the Great Red. I wish to return to the dimensional void and find silence.”

I-it was just a verbal agreement? I was stunned by how trusting Ophis was.

“They were never going to keep that promise. Can’t you see that they used you?”

“It brought me closer to defeating the Great Red, so I did not mind. Thus, I gave them my serpents.”

The pursuit of one's dreams, one's goals, huh?

“I went to the Red Dragon Emperor’s house because I thought you might have

something to help achieve my dream,” she continued. “Unusual growth. I thought a secret to the True Dragon and the Heavenly Dragons must lay there. A reason why I exist.”

“I see. I think I get it now.”

Ophis was as pure as they came. The old Demon King regime and the Hero Faction had used her for their own ends.

All they cared about were their own self-interests.

Their ambitions. To take over the world. To fight supernatural beings.

None of that mattered to Ophis, though. She wasn’t much of a last boss after all, I guess.

She was an illusory challenge, a symbol used by the Khaos Brigade...!

I was glad I helped her. We could come to an understanding with her through dialogue, unlike with Shalba.

In any event, our next move had to be to return home. We could talk more later.



I'd considered Ophis creepy, but she was just an innocent and ignorant dragon.

She was strong, infinitely so. Everyone feared her, sanctified her, and tricked her into taking on the role of a terrorist boss.

The real Ophis was a poor lonely dragon.

I could feel my consciousness slipping away.

Is this the curse...? Damn it, I have to get out of here quickly!

"Hey, Ophis. Do you want to be my friend?"

"Friend? What does that give me?"

"I can be someone for you to talk with, at the very least."

"I see. That sounds fun."

Yep, it sure did. I was glad she agreed because we really needed to get out of there.

Buildings continued to crumble around us, the rubble and remaining scenery falling into the dimensional rift.

A collapsing artificial plane...

My armor would sustain me for a bit if I fell into the dimensional rift. I would be okay provided the others summoned me back before too long.

And so Ophis and I started walking home.

Life...

The field was crumbling around me.

I continued to walk...through the devastation... But I didn't have the strength to push on anymore...

Ophis lent me her shoulder...

This was all because of that curse...

...I came here to help her. I didn't think I'd need *her* help...

...My vision was clouding... How strange... I wasn't sleepy.

...The curse didn't hurt anymore...

It wasn't painful... Not in the slightest...

"Partner! We're almost there! Azazel and the others should be opening the Dragon Gate to summon us! They'll call! We just need to wait!"

Ddraig... I know... Let's go...

What's next on my agenda when we get back...? Oh...I need to study for the midterm with everyone...

...Yes... We still have the test coming up...

...When I get home...the first thing I'll do... I'll do...

"...Hey, Ophis?"

"...?"

"What do you want to do when we get home...?"

"Go home? I have no home to which to return. Between dimensions, I lack the strength to leave."

"...Then come back...to my place."

"The Red Dragon Emperor's home?"

“...Yeah. You get along with Asia...and Irina...and everyone else, too, I’m sure...”

My legs... They wouldn’t move...

Huh...? My vision...is sideways. Upside down...

...D-did I fall over...? I didn’t even realize...

“...Ophis. Have you ever...fallen in love with someone...?”

...What on earth am I saying...?

In the back of my mind, I saw...crimson hair...beautiful...

“Hang in there, partner! Everyone’s waiting for us!”

...Yes, I know...

...Asia... She’ll cry if I don’t get back soon...

...And Akeno... She acts strong...but she’s so fragile... And Koneko... I’m so glad that she’s getting along with Ravel...

...Xenovia...and Irina... They were enemies the first time I met them...

“Ddraig. The curse is circulating through his entire body. He is at his limit.”

“I know, Ophis! I know! But he won’t die! He’s always gotten back up!”

...Rossweisse... Gasper... Come home...soon...

...Teach... Kiba... Matsuda, Motohama... My friends...

“Hey, let’s go home! Partner! What are you doing?! Get up! You always get back up!”

...Sairaorg... Vali... Let’s...fight...again...sometime...

...Rias... My beloved...

“Come back, Issei. Okay?”

...Thank goodness...I confessed...my feelings to her...

...I will...absolutely...be...by your...side...

“I love you, Rias...”

At least...I was able...to tell her that...

.....

"...Ddraig. He has stopped moving."

"...Yeah."

"...Are you crying, Ddraig?"

"...Yeah."

"I only knew him for a brief time."

"...Yeah."

"He was not a bad person. My first friend."

"...Yeah. It was fun... Ophis? No, this guy's last friend?"

"What?"

"Do you mind hearing me out before I fade and move on to a new host?"

"Very well."

"Remember him, please. Let me tell you about him..."

"Was he a good Red Dragon Emperor?"

"Yeah. The best Red Dragon Emperor there ever was."

Lost Life

I—Yuuto Kiba—watched as Azazel and the former Dragon King Tannin conducted the summoning ritual.

“The summoning array is ready. Let’s open the Dragon Gate,” Azazel declared. The circle lit up in response.

We in the Gremory Familia had returned with the others to the venue for the middle-class demon promotion exam.

Azazel had drawn a dragon-summoning array that covered the entire basement floor, using it to open a Dragon Gate and bring Issei back. Kuroka was lending a hand, too.

After the battle in that artificial dimension, we’d moved to a spot where we could create a suitably large summoning circle to forcefully retrieve Issei.

We had called on the former Dragon King Tannin to help open the gate as soon as possible. Naturally, Vali, the White Dragon Emperor, was waiting to assist, too, despite still suffering from the effects of Samael’s curse.

The president and the rest of us could do little more than watch with concern.

After everything that happened in the artificial plane, the anti-monsters created by the Annihilation Maker rampaged through the underworld, advancing toward major towns and urban areas.

Interception units put together by the joint forces of demonkind and the fallen were deployed to meet them. But they were having a hard time subduing such gargantuan and brutal creatures.

From what I heard, the anti-monsters were creating more of their kind as they marched. Apparently, the remnants of the old Demon King regime joined them well, attacking villages and towns along the creatures’ path.

Hades, the god lording over the realm of the dead, was assisting the old Demon King regime and the Hero Faction from behind the scenes. Somehow,

he'd even managed to trick the Hero Faction. Undoubtedly, he was scheming to deal a heavy blow to demons, fallen angels, and all other mythological forces. It was all because of him that those gargantuan anti-monsters were running wild. He probably found the whole situation incredibly amusing.

As if that wasn't bad enough, there was also the matter of Ophis's stolen powers. Cao took them to create a new Ophis...

The situation was so serious that the Demon Kings were in discussions with Heaven's forces and the fallen angels... However, Cao Cao's Holy Spear made him too much of a danger, and the three great powers were reluctant to challenge him directly.

A spear capable of slaying gods and Demon Kings. If the Demon Kings and leaders of the other factions in the underworld fell victim to it, the status quo would be upended. This made it difficult for those in charge to take direct action.

As such, up-and-coming demon youths like the members of the Gremory Familia, and other teams of ultimate-class demons, had been ordered to step in to take down the anti-monsters. We were formidable in our own right, after all. So we had to step in where our leaders couldn't. Sairaorg Bael had already joined the fray.

Relief units were dispatched from all the allied parties. Heaven sent its Brave Saints, the fallen angels marshalled their Sacred Gear users, and the Norse deployed squads of Valkyries. All responded to this crisis in the underworld, answering the call of demonkind. If gods and Demon Kings couldn't act, then it fell on others to do so.

Xenovia and Irina had safely informed the leaders of the crisis. From what I heard, they were presently in Heaven working to restore Durendal.

Unfortunately, the anti-monsters were on track to destroy the capital city. Civilians were evacuating, but there was no telling whether everyone would get out in time.

We need your help, Issei. Now is the time for the Red Dragon Emperor to step in and save the underworld... There are countless children from the capital waiting for you to make your appearance!

You need to come back!

“All right, we’re connected!” Azazel shouted as light pulsed through the magic circle!

His Fafnir gemstone released a golden glow, while Vali’s body was shrouded in white light and Tannin radiated purple. The array shone brighter as though in response to them.

At last, it let out a strong burst, and a figure took shape in the center of the circle. Then the light enveloped the entire floor.

I raised a hand to shield my eyes, but the glow quickly subsided, and we all looked eagerly to see who had appeared.

There, resting on the ground, was a group of eight crimson Pawn pieces.

...

Huh...? Wh-what’s the meaning of this...? I couldn’t comprehend what happened.

It wasn’t Issei, just a set of Evil Pieces. That was all. They were colored like the president’s Evil Pieces, but they weren’t Issei.

Pawns...

It took us all a moment to register the deeper meaning of this.

Azazel collapsed and slammed his fist on the floor. “You idiot...!”

Then the truth dawned on the rest of us.

Akeno dropped to her knees, her strength gone, while the president stood motionless.

“Where’s...Issei?” Asia breathed.

Ravel shook her head, whispering “No...” as she took an expressionless Koneko’s arm.

How could you, Issei? Just sending back your Evil Pieces? Didn’t you promise to come home?

Tears ran down my face for the longest time.

That was the day we lost Issei...

AFTERWORD

Ishibumi here. I've been on a diet since the start of summer, and by the end of November, I've lost a full ten kilograms. Yeah, something came up during my summer checkup... No, it's nothing serious, but I do need to change what I eat. All I've done is watch my calories, but it's had a big impact on my weight.

I bet you're thinking "That's it?!" after reading the ending. Well, this is the first half of a two-part story.

Battle → Danger → Falling back on Rias's breasts → Issei powers up → Victory! Is this the usual path to success for the Gremory Familia? This time around, allies and enemies alike realize just how formidable that cycle can be.

A quick look at the Gremory Familia is enough to understand that they place heavy emphasis on raw firepower. That's most obvious if you look at its individual members. Their offensive capabilities are simply overwhelming. All Rias has to do is give a simple command—"Do it!"—and most foes will be swiftly defeated. However, the team has trouble when facing enemies who specialize in fancy techniques, or have strong defense-and barrier-type abilities. This time, Cao Cao and Georg knew the Gremory Familia's weaknesses and broke through. From my perspective, it makes the story easier to follow if the main group rushes into action without much thought. And I thought it would be easier for readers to get emotionally involved if the team was proactive in fights.

This isn't a Familia that takes losses well, though. Following previous battles, each member has made it a priority to develop their strengths and eliminate their weaknesses to continue growing. However, I do wonder if Xenovia's been a bit too unlucky... Lately, she's only taken center stage against one-sided abilities, when she launches opening attacks, or when she uses her Durendal Cannon.

Rias's breasts have awakened further! Our Switch Princess knows no limits. When paired with Issei, she manages to unlock a miraculous new power. Is this breast power...?

On top of that, Koneko beat the other heroines and proposed! Although Kuroka remains on the prowl... How many bridal candidates will our Breast Dragon have? I shudder just thinking about it.

Then we come to the unluckiest dragon in the world—Ddraig. He continues to suffer because of his host's fondness for breasts, mentally exhausted to the level that he needs medication to keep going. Everyone, please offer the most pitiful dragon there is your continued support.

Something very surprising came up in a survey conducted on *Fujimi Shobo's* homepage. Issei's popularity is such that he ranks in the top three of all characters, outranking each of our heroines. To be honest, this came as a huge shock to everyone. To think that the hero of the series is more beloved than the heroines... In fact, looking back over allies and enemies alike, it seems there are more handsome pretty-boy types in this series than beautiful women.

Then we have Kiba, our top-ranking pretty boy, a character who has tremendous success with girls. We've received all kinds of requests to give him a girlfriend, but the thing is, he's part of Issei's harem! No, I mean he's Issei's friend! Somehow, Issei is more popular than Kiba...

Anyway, what about that ending? Expect plenty of amazing developments in the next volume!

We had another all-out display of Longinus Balance Breakers this time around—a full five of them! Not only does the True Longinus's Balance Breaker possess a range of different abilities, but its user is so powerful, he's practically cheating. And the Dimension Lost's Balance Breaker is strong enough to cage in Ophis, at least temporarily. The Annihilation Maker, on the other hand, can produce gigantic monsters! So you see, these top-tier Longinuses are literally world-destroying! No wonder they're so highly rated.

We also finally have the names for the other Longinuses, even if they haven't appeared in the story directly... I wonder if we'll have a chance to see them all in action? It would be nice to introduce them properly in another story set in

the same world or something.

Up next is Samael, the Dragon Eater, the strongest of all anti-dragon entities. Ophis and our two Heavenly Dragons have been afflicted by his curse. But it's all about strengths and weaknesses, and Samael isn't outright invincible. He is, however, an absolutely forbidden existence, one capable of rendering dragons extinct. Even Georg, a Longinus user and an exceptionally capable mage in his own right, is able to control Samael for only a limited period, and that's with tons of restrictions on him. Since Samael is supposed to be sealed, this is his first and only appearance.

And Ophis has entered the stage again. She's actually an incredibly lonely spirit. Please share your love with her.

Then we have Hades and his grim reaper faction, operating behind the scenes. They're the final tricksters of this third story arc, which started with another trickster, the evil god Loki. I thought it only appropriate to have another god play the role of the big bad at the end. I mean, there are plenty of deities who suddenly intervene in situations to further their own designs in mythology, right? So this is pretty godlike, wouldn't you say?

Recently, I've found myself considering writing a story about past events in the DxD universe. Like the story of how Sirzechs became a Demon King, detailing his becoming the ace of the anti-Demon King faction, his meeting Grayfia, and his own elevation to the top job. Something like *High School DxD Zero* maybe? It could end up being way more serious, losing that DxD feeling as a result... Well, this is just me thinking out loud, so don't take my ramblings all that seriously. I also thought a story about exorcists might be interesting. It would begin after the three major powers form their alliance, leaving exorcists out of a job. The demons and fallen angels were supposed to be the church's enemies, and then they suddenly became allies. The plot would follow an ultimate-class exorcist dispatched to peaceful Japan and the chaos that ensues... Yes, this is all just idle brainstorming. Anyway, if you want to read either of those, please write to my publisher.

So about that other project based in the same world—I've been focusing on DxD so much that it hasn't really progressed at all. I've just been so busy, especially with things related to the DxD anime, and I've had to reprioritize

everything. It would be disrespectful to my readers and everyone involved in production if I divided my attention and screwed up both projects, so I've been concentrating on DxD for the time being. Sorry about that. Please wait awhile longer.

Now for my acknowledgments. To Miyama-Zero, my editor H, and my sub-editor S—thank you! You've all been a tremendous help with the anime and related materials. On top of that, Volume 2 of the manga by Hiroji Mishima is now on sale!

The next book, Volume 12, will conclude the third arc, which began in Volume 7. What will happen to the girls of the Gremory Familia now that Issei is gone? What about Ophis and Ddraig?

Look forward to the Gremory Familia's counterattack, as well as the Sitri Familia and Sairaorg duking it out with the Khaos Brigade! Please hold out for the second half of this two-part episode!

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